

STATO MAGGIORE DELL'ESERCITO

UFFICIO STORICO

MARIO MONTANARI

LE OPERAZIONI
IN AFRICA
SETTENTRIONALE

VOL. II - TOBRUK

(Marzo 1941-Gennaio 1942)

ROMA 1993

GENERAL STAFF OF THE ARMY HISTORICAL HISTORY
MARIO MONTANARI

THE OPERATIONS IN NORTH AFRICA
VOL. II - TOBRUK
(1941 March – January 1942)
ROME 1993

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By Historical Office SME - Rome 1985
1st edition, 1985 2nd edition, 1993

PRESENTATION

The present book on the operations of the Italian Army in North Africa during the Second World War is the second one in a series of four that will exhaust the analysis of the campaign in that theater of operations.

The study, entitled with the place name most characteristic and peculiar to the operational cycle examined - "Tobruk" in the detail -, includes, integral and extends the events described in the third and fourth book of the previous series: "The first Italian-German counter-offensive in North Africa" and "The Second British offensive in North Africa and Italian - German withdraw in Sirtica Orientale", published respectively in 1974 and 1949 from the Historical Office of the General Staff of the Army.

Based on the relations of then the military members of the Commonwealth British (English, New Zealand, South African, Indian, and Australian), and on those German official documents, wealth of Italian and foreign the memoirs and books up to now published and on the archival documentation of the Historical Office, the volume has the charm of a detached objectivity for temporal sediment, acquaintance and intercrossed verification of the facts, methodological property of surveying and exposure of the political - strategic vicissitudes and technical-operating of both sides in the war.

The described operational cycle, begun with the arrival of the German units in Africa to support their Ally and with a vigorous regaining of the initiative on part of the Axis forces, marks the end of the "war parallel" of Italy, is identified - in the image - with the second "pendulum" of the African conflict and includes the finally British offensive resumptions called coded "Brevity", "Battleaxe" and "Crusader", the first two contained and beaten back, the third instead victorious and such forcing us to, after nearly a year of successes, to withdraw on the departure positions. But, beyond every doubt, the confirmation of the value of the Italian units who largely - almost lacking any tactical mobility - however it has guaranteed to is also modest, although effectively more striking, mass Germanic maneuver wearing away and sacrificed static support - the only one that it could give - without which many successes would surely not have been achieved.

THE HEAD OF THE HISTORICAL OFFICE

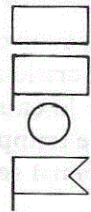
CONVENTIONAL SIGNS

used in sketches

Were employed unit markings currently in use by the Italian army, namely:

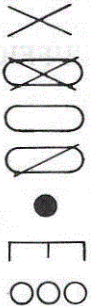
1. Basic Symbols

Unit
Command
Logistical Instulation
Logistical Command



2. Arms Symbols

Infantry
Mechanized Infantry
Armor
Armored Cavalry
Artillery
Engineer
Motorized Troops



3. Status Symbols

Army	XXXXX	Regiment	III
Corp	XXX	Battalion or Group	II
Division	XX	Company or Battery	I
Brigade	X		

To indicate a complex tactical using the symbol above the symbol of rank

4. Indication of the units

To the left of the base symbol has the numeric code corresponding to the symbol represented rank and unit code right where you placed the Department in question.

Es. 2  5 Indicates II Bn. of the 5th Inf. Rgt.

5. Indication of nationality

Where necessary, to the right of the symbol are used the abbreviations IT: Italy; Ge: Germany; UK: United Kingdom; AU: Australia; NZ: New Zealand; FR: France; Po: Poland.

Translators notes:

I would like to take a moment to clarify this work. I do not claim authorship and this is a translation done with software for that task, while I did proof read through the work, some things did become clear. The software chooses the most common usage for a work, while the author meant something else. This work is written for a college level reading skills, plus there are often cultural references or idem which I often miss. Also the text is full of spelling mistakes, likely due to poor proof reading where the printer drops a letter. As well as my difficulty with Italian word endings which in Italian indicate who's taking actions or a about who the action refers. I think I compensated well, but it was a learning experience, so I got better as the work progressed. Or I hope so.

I have retained the Italian command titles, for example using Comando Supremo instead of Supreme Command. All the powers had their own supreme commands so it was easier to identify which supreme command is being referred to. The same go for the other Italian commands. Please remember the Italian armed forces at this time are "Royal" forces. So the "R" before the command symbolizes this. To be clear R. Esercito (Royal Army), R. Aeronautica (Royal Air Force), R. Marina (Royal Navy).

Due to problems in converting file formats I'm sending out Book 2 of the North African operations first, While book 1 was completed years ago, it is no longer publishable.

We pick up the history in March of 1941, which if the there was the will Mussolini could have been deposed. He standing was very low losing East Africa, failing in the invasions of Egypt and Greece. Unfortunately the non-Fascists did not make a stand. And Hitler came to his rescue inspire of the plans for Barbarossa. The Italian Army will play a support role for the rest of the war. Fighting historically without the tools for a modern war and always on the edge of disaster. Remember the three thing needed for Blitzkerg, An armored spearhead to pierce the enemy line, communications to direct artillery and tactical air support as well as coordinate the movement of the units, and speed to spread confusion and panic in the enemies rear areas and command. Italy lacked all three. While the author recounts with clarity the events, he is relaying on the reader to puzzle out cause and effect. As we see here, there was nothing wrong with the defensive works around Tobruk in 1940, the 10th Army lacked the proper equipment and was surprised and panicky. In 1941 the same works would hold off an entire army. At the same time the British Army & Airforce are learning to overcome the paradigm shift represented by the Blitzkerg. Changing their fighting methods. in fact fielding a better army then the Africa Korps, but still learning how to use it.

R. Denny
2015

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THE MOST COMMON TOPOGRAPHICAL TERMS IN CYRENAICA

AGFA = hole, cave.

AGHIRA = small cultivated Valley, before an dependant name or aghiret
pronunciation aghin.

AGLA opp. Ogla = meeting of small pits.

AIN = source, fountain, well. Literally means eye.

ALEM = border, mountain or high Hill.

ALG opp. Algh = Canal, passage, smothering of Wadi.

ARGUB pl. Araghil = Hill, coast, mountain buttress.

BAHAR o Bahr, pl. Buhur = sea, baja, Lake, River.

BATEN = soil, large flat Valley depressed; Depression between two slopes.

BIAR, the same as Abiar (pl. of Bir pozzo).

BU = father, place where abounds on ... the ... see the word Umm.

BUER = small, diminutive pit of Bir.

BURG opp. Borg, from Latin burgus = strong, fortified castle, House, solid stone
building.

CHEF, vulgar pronunciation of caf = rock peak, peak, cave Ridge.

DAHAR = back, back of a large mountain, plateau, Plains.

DAR = tent, home, House, building, residence, etc. etc. (PL. diar, Paco and dor).

ELUET = mountain, Hill, high ground. Strives for Hill ... for example, Eluet = Height
of Abdalla Abdalla.

GABR = burial, grave; PL. gbur:, pronounced gobur also.

GADIR opp. Ghedir, pl. Ghedran = water puddle, pond (also very wide), shallow
water, bog, swamp, tank, rain water collector.

GARA = High ground, isolated Hill amidst the sands.

GASR = Castle, a fortified House, circondato village of walls and the like; PL. Pur, dim.
gser

GEBBANA = cemetery, pl. gebaden or gebbanat.

JABAL = mountain, mountain ranges; PL. Ancient Gebal.

GESIRA or better gezira = Island, in a very large, because it can indicate also a
peninsula, f) a Reed Islet in the middle of a swamp, or an island of palme.

GOT, pl. Guat opp. aguat = spacious sunken ground; well irrigated Valley and phenyl;
small shelf put to cultivation; small OASIS. In Cyrenaica means especially
plateau, shelf and you say put.

GUBBA = Dome, domed Chapel, erected over the grave of a marabout. Sometimes it
means «arch»

HAGFA = hole, cave, pl. hagheifat (Hagfet et-Tarada = Cave of pursuit).

HAGIAG and agage = Hill, soil, sand dune ripple (Hagiag er-Rib = wind, hills, sand
dunes massed by the wind); Hagiag er Ramla = Sand Hills. HALGH = Canal,
shrinking passage, the Wadi.

HOSC = fence, farm, pl. Hiscian or Hiasc (Hosc er-Rih = The house to the wind).

HISCET = rovi, pruni, "dense forest terrain with vegetation, bushy.

MAATEN, pl. Maaten = Juogo for a landing on the livestock watering hole; watering hole.

MARSA = port, anchorage. It can be as well a point far from the coast that communicates with the sea through a particular port State control. So Mana Suluq = Potto in Suluq; is a coastal point which does or can do head Suluq traffic towards the Sea (Manet el-Hilal = Potto of the new moon; El-Mresa or El-Mreisa = the little port).

MENGAR = water-filled pit with the tight orifice; reservoir basin.

MENGAR = Point, Cape.

MERG, pl. Murg = Prairie, Marsh and swamp.

MERGHEB = Hill, Hill; pl. Mmgheb (means also sentry).

MOFSEL, pl. Mafasel = Pass.

MOGARA, pl. Mogair = cave, Lair or Den.

RAHEIBA = space large and broad, cultivated land, hollow, square (Raheibet Belgardan = basin of the B. ...).

RAMLA = sand deposit, heap, heap (Raml.état or er-Ramletat = heaps of sand, small dunes).

RAS, pl. Rus = head, Cape, top; peak, point, head, Cape, principle, point of origin and the like. It says even where principia a Wadi.

RUES, dim. di ras = small hill, a small rocky hill, pl. ruesat (Ruesat el-Gsir = little castle Hills).

SANIA, pl. Suani = literally means pit «pit to a scoop-wheel, often surrounded by a garden or an eight, on waves in toponymy meaning eight, Garden, farm; Dim. Paul (Zeinuba = Saniet: Otto z...)

SCIAABA = watercourse between the sands; ravine, crevasse, crevasse carved in to the mountain; PL. Sciaab.

SEBCHA = salty lake, pond; submerged shoal during winter, the summer in desiccated part and reduced to brackish lagoon. is commonly called a Sbocha.

SEIED (opp. es-seied, -es-saied, as-saied) = have I to sidi. SENIET = Myself that saniet.

SIDI = word composed of two elements: SID, Lord, Chief, master and the pronominal possessive, ' me '; means "my master.". Often is provided with some name marabout marabout. Means place where he buried the marabout. Sometimes instead of sidi meets es-seied, OPP. es-saied. Sidi in common parlance is used as in French "monsieur".

SILCH = "thread" , then "line", via trail; pl. Siluch.

SIRA = via, way, strada. In Cyrenaica has the meaning of pile, stones or Stony Hill "Hill" (Sira el-Hamm = Red Hill).

SUANI, dim. of Sania = orchards, gardens, farms.

SUENIA, dim. of Sania = orchard, garden, farm.

SUERA = dim. of Sira.

SULBIA or es-Sulbia = «breast», the side, the back of a mountain.

SOLUCH = 'the streets ', where different routes converge.

TARIGH, opp. Trigh = road, path, way;; pl. Trugh, or Tergan or Tergat.

WADI = the original meaning of "Valley", "bed of a watercourse" (almost always dry except during the rainy season), go to

to "River, water". Other meanings: "Camino, via diluvia Valley of rainwater". Plural: Uidian, app. Uudian; dim. Udei; in lieu of udei is often used scetib, meaning "small valley, a small stream of water during the rains".

UIDIAN (for uidan opp. uidian) = one of the forms of PL. of Wadi.

UMM, a term almost synonymous with bu, his real meaning is "mother" or, and takes place to place to place, rich in (Umm el-Hagel = place where partridges; Umm Sala = place of rocks).

UIDIAN (for uidan or uidian) = one of the forms of PL. of Wadi.

UMM, a term almost synonymous with bu, his real meaning is cmother» or, and takes place to place to place, rich in ... (Umm El-Hagel = place where partridges; Umm Sala = place of rocks).

ZEMLA opp. of Zirma = mean secluded place, corner, corner of home; then the place of-withdrawal, monastery, convent, Hermitage. Correctly means stable of charity and religious; pl. Zuàia (Zuàiet el Hamama) = Zuàia of the doves.

Note: The letter I Arabic definite article el or changes in pronunciation, in the first consonant of the following name when this is a dental: d, dh, t, th, s, sb, z, I, r, n. This will give: ed Duda, Eluet-et-Hàreifet en Nbeidat Tamet, etc.; but Gazala, Bir el Gobi, etc.

First Chapter **THE GENERAL SITUATION IN MID MARCH 1941**

THE ITALIAN - GERMAN FORCES AND INTENSIONS.

It is also brief preamble is important. When the campaigns of 1941-42 in North Africa is spoken about the name of a General, above all, jumps to mind: Rommel. Almost unknown in Italy and Great Britain, he was introduced on the Libyan stage with look and an emergency of himself that, dates also the circumstances, could not but hit the highest Italian military heads. Of the rest, already it was seen with remarkable aversion from the main exponents of the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW) and of *Oberkommando des Heeres* (OKH), let alone from many colleagues. In less than a month his name roared in North Africa and Europe, in the capitals and the Comandi Supremi, in the local populace and above all among the troops under his orders. He provoked admiration and jealousy, convinced esteem and sour critic. Audacious or wrongly was judged seen and simple gambler, optimal tactical and mediocre strategist, calculating and a bad logistician. In any case the best desert general he was without doubt, even if he did not meet in direct duel who with good reason can be thought would have been his more skillful antagonist: Gen. Richard O'Connor.

Probably one of the best syntheses on the action of command of Rommel remains that one supplied at the end of the war from who he was near in North Africa, in quality of his general staff:

"To my warning - he had to then write Maj. von Mellenthin, head of the information office of the *Panzergruppe Afrika* and then head of the operations section of the Italian-German armored Army - he was the ideal commander for the war in the desert. His habit "to command from the front" sometimes backfired against him; decisions involved the entire army sometimes were influenced beyond measure from successes or pure local failures. On the other hand, being the person at the place of the danger - and he had a mysterious ability to appear in the right place at the right moment - he was in a position to adapt the plans to the new situations, that in the fluid circumstances of the western Desert it was a factor of supreme importance. In planning an operation he was complete and reflexive; in taking a decision on the battlefield he was audacious and express" ⁽¹⁾.

On some specific aspects of his character can be passed over. It is true that he dared until to the extreme limit of the possibilities, that he dared when the operating situation advised caution, but if he had often not run risks, take into account or not, he would not have ever obtained one victory. That some decisions have been questionable, sometimes its formulated appreciations too much to warmth, some unjust attitudes cannot amaze. Also the great captains sometimes supplied the flank to analogous notes. And no blame - for how much justified - can damage his charisma, the princely talent, indispensable to the true leader. His charisma, has attended well, nothing at all provoked some supported from paternalistic ways or alone propaganda of electoral type, even if Rommel knew to put in evidence much good. He was in truth a demanding, hard commander, of an even brutal energy at times ⁽²⁾. But he was also with if same and it paid in first person.

In the comparisons of the Italian ally cannot be said as been generous; moreover he was shown ready to formulate his public praise to the distinguished units in combat and to admit loyal to have often asked our divisions, especially to the *Ariete*, more than how much they could give with the armament and the means which they had. It must recognize that his critic was not turned to the troops: "*the defeat of the Italians* - he asserted - *was a consequence of the entire Italian military system and among them, of the bad armament and little interest that many high personalities, military heads and men of state, had for this war*" ⁽³⁾. He was carried to attribute the merit of the great and small successes to the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* (DAK), the working role acquitted by the Italian units had even been of all respect. It was not objective, perhaps but that derived from the habit to study and to resolve the tactical problems essentially being based on the employment of the German divisions, because the *Panzer* and 88 guns it possessed an unquestionably determining weight. It does not have to forget that he had the knowledge of being the only head with combat experience - victorious for committee, and in that measure! - at the head of major armored unit against the same adversaries and that his units were the only ones to know the armored tactics on the battlefield, while to the Italians war experience, means lacked adapted and mentality. In compensation these last ones tried to show diligent students and too much more to directed contact with the *Afrikakorps* they were in kind to the height of the situation. Next, therefore, to observations that hurt our sensibility, they exist

most numerous orders of the day and letters of praise, in which the expressions used appear absolutely sincere and not of pure convenience towards their ally.

In mid February 1941 the Italian general situation was desperate. On the sea the picture could not relieve. After the raid of 11 November on Taranto, that had sunk the battleship *Cavour* and put out of combat for many months battleships *Duilio* and *Littorio*, and the bombing of 9 December and 8 January on Naples, that had seriously damaged respective the cruiser *Pola* and the battleship *Cesare*, the General Staff of the R. Navy (Supermarine) had the battleships moved back to La Spezia, awaiting the improvements in the system of protection of the ships at Naples and Taranto concurred to re-use those bases. Consequently, in mid February deployment of the Italian fleet was the following:

At La Spezia the battleships *Vittorio Veneto*, *Andrea Dona* and *Giulio Cesare* (in route to port) and the cruiser *Fiume* (under repair);
At Naples the cruiser *Pola* (under repair);
At Messina the cruisers *Trento*, *Trieste* and *Bolzano*;
At Taranto the battleships *Littorio* and *Duilio* (both under repair) and the cruisers *Zara* and *Gorizia*.

Undoubtedly it was be a matter of an eccentric deployment for the operating necessities of the central Mediterranean and depressing for the moral of the crews. Supermarina became account of the very disadvantage, but it was not just the case to run useless risks. However, the course of the emergency of the work for the anchorages revealed itself rather slow and it could not be counted on the complete completion before April; therefore, as a intermediate solution, they came decided to move the *Vittorio Veneto* to as soon as possible to Taranto, moving at the same time the others two battleships to Naples.

But, while the eastern basin of the Mediterranean was under full British dominion and the central introduced vulnerable to attack departing from the enemy air force bases, plus those neighboring bases of Cineraria had fallen and occupied Crete. The situation deriving from such state of things had been illustrated in raw terms - and remarkably pessimists - from Adm. Arturo Riccardi, undersecretary of State and chief of general staff of the R. Navy, to Adm. Erich Raeder in the convention of Merano of 13-14 February ⁽⁴⁾.

During the development of the operations in North Africa formed the object of careful examination because the Germans also recognized the necessity to arrest the offensive of Wavell before that he reached Tripoli. Naturally, under the naval aspect the main problem was that one of supply of too many and material overseas. All the possibilities of closing of the channel of Sicily came therefore winnowed: aerial means (recognition and hunting); underwater means, which submarines for ambush and mines for the obstructions; means of surface for cover and cruises of protection. In particular, the Germans offered unsweepable mines and this was, in definitive, the most concrete result of the convention.

Also on the various land theaters of operations the course of the events was such to worry. In Albania the Greeks had just to beginning to the battle of Tepeleni and for how much Gen. Cavallero had shown optimistic in talk he had with Mussolini on the 1st of the month at Bisceglie, the engagement was hard and the escape from the tunnel was still not in sight; in East Africa was fought on the Giuba and was begun the battle of Cheren in an operating theater without hope; in North Africa the 10th Army did not exist anymore and the rest of the 5th army and the 5th air squadron, had gotten morally depressed, were believed about to oppose the next imminent conclusive continuation of the British effort on Tripoli (sketch n., 1).

Mussolini comprised not to be able to conserve silence and tried to find convincing tones in order to justify the set backs in front of public opinion, giving them in time with some hope for the future:

"(...) Definitively to get rid of the armies of Great Britain on the European continent, the war could not assume a naval, aerial character and for us also colonial. It is in the geographic order and historical of the things that to Italy are reserves the farther and difficult theatres of war: war overseas and war in the desert (...). However, during the first four months of war we were in a position to inflicting serious naval, aerial, land blows to the forces of the British Empire.

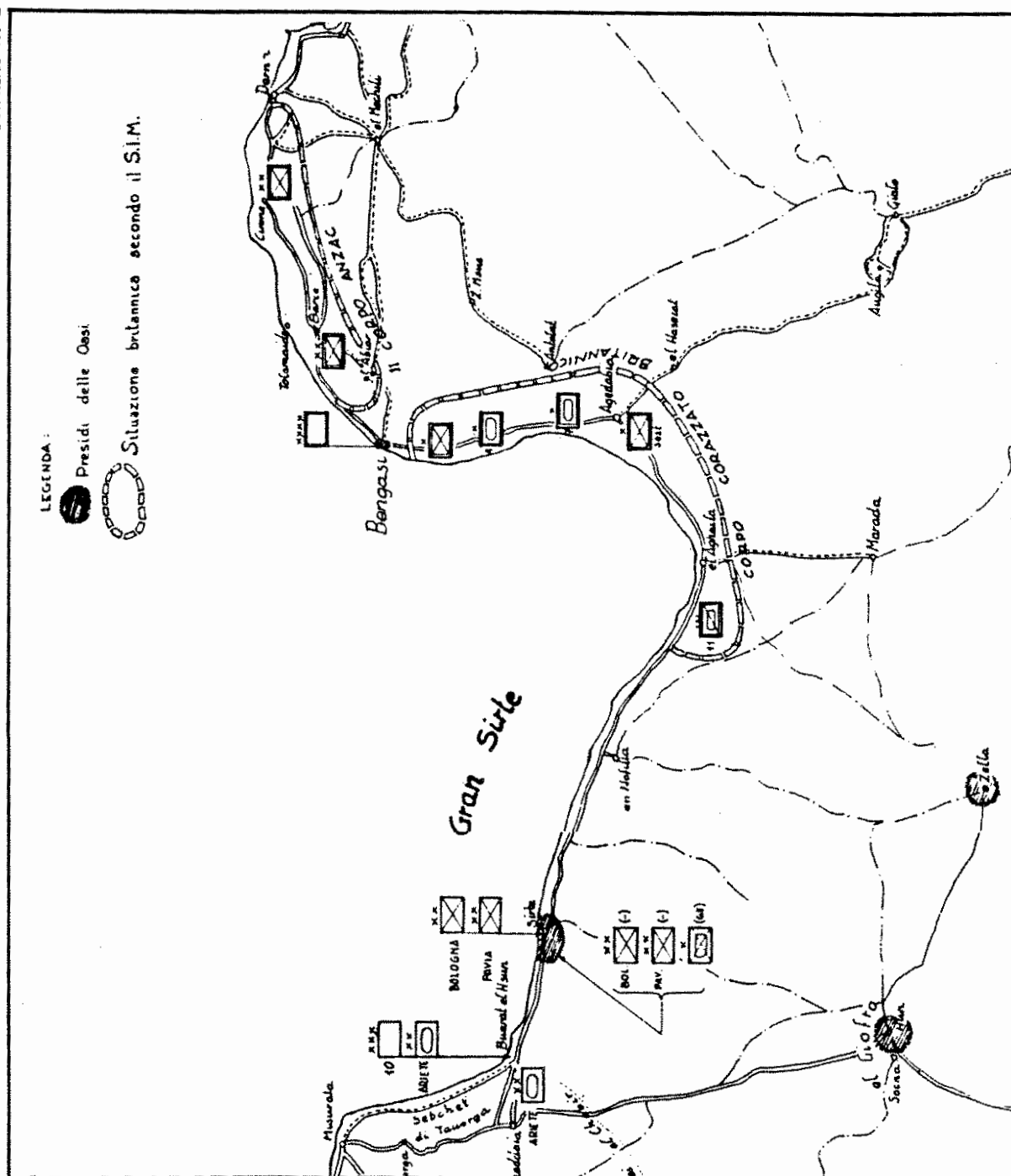
Until to 1935 the attention of our General Staffs was capacity on Libya (...). With aggravating itself of the European tension and after the events of 1935-1936, the Libya, reconquered by the Fascists, it was considered one of the more delicate points of our strategic general situation in how much it could be attacked on two fronts ⁽⁵⁾.

The effort in order to completely upgrade the Libya militarily turns out from these figures. Only in the period that goes from October 1937 to the 31 January 1941 have been sends to the Libya 14,000 officials and 396,358 soldiers and constituted two Armies: the 5th and the 10th. This counted ten national and Libyan divisions between them. In the same

1. Situation of opposing forces 15 February 1941

SITUAZIONE DELLE FORZE CONTRAPPOSTE IL 15 FEBBRAIO 1941

Schizzo n. 1



period of time has been sent 1,924 guns of all bores and many of them of recent construction and model, 15,386 machine-guns, 11 million artillery shells, a billion 334 million rounds for portable arms, 287,877 tons of materials for engineers; 24 thousand tons of clothing and equipment; 779 tanks with a with a 100 heavy; 9,584 motor vehicles of various types; 4,809 motorcycles. These figures demonstrate that to the "preparation of the defense of Libya it had been a dedicated effort that can be called imposing (...).

It was between October and November that Great Britain assembled and marshaled against us the bulk of its imperial forces recruited in three continents and armed from the fourth, concentrated in Egypt 15 divisions and a considerable mass of medium tanks and hurled them against our alignment in Marmarica, that it had in front line the Libyan divisions -- valorous and faithful - but not very suitable to stand up to the enemy machine. It had, therefore, 9 December, beginning the battle, in greater than which we prepared, of five or six days, and that after two Months approximately the enemy had taken Benghazi (...).

We say bread to the bread, wine to the wine and when the enemy wins a battle is useless and to try to ridicule, as they exactly make in their immeasurable English hypocrisy, to deny it or to diminish it. An entire army, the 10th, has been sweep away nearly completely. The V air squadron nearly has literally sacrificed itself. Where possible it resisted and sometimes with fury. Since we make this acknowledgment, we are useless that the enemy swollen the figures of its booty (...). Not very heavy are the losses that we have inflicted against the English. To say, as they make, that their losses in the battle of the 60 days in Cyrenaica do not exceed the 2,000 *between died and wounded* it is to want to add a note of grotesque to drama (...) ⁽⁶⁾.

From 11 November (...) the vicissitudes of the war have been adverse to us. We must recognize it. We have had the grey days. It is the vicissitude of all wars (...) ⁽⁷⁾.

Useless to say that the entire convincing speech had little or no hope and it was a collection in the phrase that "*between little will be spring and like it wants the season, our season, will come the season. I say to you that the season will come and will come in everyone of the four cardinal points.*

Also on the technical plan too many things left to wish. First of all the efficiency of major mobile units was far from given confidence. Gen. Mario Roatta, chief officer of General Staff of the Army, had indicated the reasons without periphrasis to Gen. Alfredo Guzzoni, undersecretary of War and chief of Joint Chief of Staff: the demobilization of 600,000 men ordered by the ministry in October 1940 had brought a most serious prejudgment to the entire war machine; the training objective of the troops was poor for causes going back to first years of the Twenties, on which springs from the insufficiency of the organization, and for the none acquaintance of the new infantry arm from recent block of the personnel in dismissal not recalled in

1940; finally the modernization of the artilleries was in the beginning phase and mechanization of the army still in pieces ⁽⁸⁾. These considerations, with the overseas transport difficulties, had induced to prefer the reconstitution at home of the major units of the 5th Army rather than their substitution with new divisions sent from the motherland, obviously less than it was not be a matter of special major unit. For the supplementary troops of army corps and of the army, especially of artillery and engineers, it had been decided to reach to 4th army (French frontier) and to the 2nd Army (Yugoslavia frontier), not that eventually to the 6th Army (or the Po).

The German participation to the operations in North Africa had been seen as necessary by OKW ⁽⁹⁾, but had found very lukewarm acceptance from part of Hitler, that he stretched to make leave to his ally, much more than initially Mussolini had rejected the proposed of participation. The insistentes of Gen. Enno von Rintelen, Rome military attaché, visa the Italian impossibility to alone lead the war in the theater of operations of the Mediterranean ⁽¹⁰⁾, and above all the battle of Sidi el-Barrani convinced all perhaps that without the Germanic aid the Cyrenaica and all Libya was lost ⁽¹¹⁾.

The state of the things existing in Libya in February 1941 was seen with different eyes from the two High commands of the Axis and from who it was in place. Rome and Berlin were found substantially of agreement on the task of the 5th Army: to concur the disembarkation of Italian and German armored and motorizes reinforcements. To gain time, at least three weeks, had to come begun envisioned with a delaying maneuver in the Sirtica, and also to east of Sirte, and with a static more defense possible to the east regarding Tripoli (at least beyond Misurata), in order to force the English to fight with the desert to the sides and to give safety to the advanced airfields. While massive air support could be resorted to. After all, an advanced defense with an attitude of transition and safety, totally opposed to whichever initiative.

Rommel disembarked at Tripoli on 12 February. He was received by the Lt. Col. Heggenreiner, official of connection between the Comando Superiore F.A. North Africa and the German military mission to Rome, which the future repatriation of Mar. Graziani, shaken, made bitter and tired, and of the state of mind of disheartenment and prostration of military and civil atmospheres. Rommel hurried to introduce himself to Italian Gen. Gariboldi, new advanced commander, in order to put him

current of the received directives and above all of the fact that the day before, in Rome, Guzzoni had shared the point of view of the OKW. Gariboldi, there and then, remained very perplexed and he did not hide just his skepticism, then advised his to make reconnaissance on the area around Sirte to throw them off balance. In that same afternoon Rommel, with Lt. Col Rudolf Schmundt, the first assistant of Hitler, made a flight along until Sirte, in whose area found the most advanced Italian unit. The panoramic vision of the land strengthened proposal of Rommel to set up a defended static more or less to the height before Sirte and to play the card of combat being based on the armored units on the hand. Useless to say that determining how much weight in the decision had the shapes of the natural atmosphere as well as the distance relationships.

Returning to Tripoli, Rommel expected a new argument with Gariboldi, but in the meantime Roatta had arrived, which personal account of the situation in the North African theater of operations ⁽¹²⁾ had decided to become, and had informed Gariboldi of the agreement of views of the Comando Supremo. The agreement was therefore found and Rommel telegraphed to the OKW:

"First talks with General Gariboldi and Roatta had satisfactory outcome. Our suggestions were received and sent to you. Advanced combatant units engaged at Sirte. Personally Executed aerial reconnaissance in that area".

A precise idea of the course of the talk can be gained from the message of Roatta to Guzzoni:

"(...) The Mission [German] has confirmed that also admitting consequent risks at the time to disposition in the case it was decided advanced defense noting Germanic units progress and will hurry inflow. In the case it was decided instead defended on rear line of which over [Homs-Cussabat- Tarhuna] Mission it would newly have submitted the decision to the Fuhrer.

In consequence it has exposed said point of view to General Gariboldi. These, held account of the importance and also of the German contribution, have decided for the advanced defense with order that it will send for information tomorrow at noon by air. German mission therefore has been engaged to bomb daily from tomorrow the British armored forces, to move air forces to the advances fields, near Sirte, to employ as soon as it disembarks the single units of the 5th division in the Sirte area and to put at our disposition trucks for transport. He has moreover declared that ready to accelerate transports east, and, for second division group, also to adopt system Italian marine transport, more quickly than those formally used (...)" ⁽¹³⁾.

Gariboldi, on the other hand, was limited to answer to the Comando Supremo with some accuracy. The armored division *Ariete* –

it remembered - only had light tanks of most modest war significance; the infantry divisions of the 5th Army were lacking in the greater part of the artilleries (yielded opportunely in reinforce to major units of the 10th Army), the machine-gun battalions and the antitank companies; the lacking efficient motor vehicles for transport troops was limited to only 200 trucks; the "*land where the forces alignment is wished for is flat without tactical hold points, which can be followed in all senses by mechanized means, where therefore static infantry and without adapted arms is at the mercy of the mechanized enemy*". All that having advice against, at least in the conditions of the moment, the movement of the divisions in the desert zone; however, in order to comply with the advance orders and to join to desires of their ally, the Armed forces high command had decided to send in the zone of Sirte-Buerat the X Army Corps (Inf. Div. *Pavza*, Inf. Div. *Bologna* and Arm. Div. *Ariete*); to move the Inf. Div. *Brescia*, without its artilleries, on the Tarhuna-Cussabat line in order to complete the obstruction action at Homs; to leave to a simple surveillance the entrenched field of Tripoli and to conserve the normal cover towards the west ⁽¹⁴⁾.

"With these dispositions - Gariboldi added - I think of to have complied with the orders given me. I do not hide but that also in this formation it is possible, if not easiest, to the enemy who remainders in forces, the encircling and the penetration until Tripoli.

I hope but it is a transitory situation, because with the progressive arrival of means they will improve the conditions and it will be able, if the arrivals will reach in time, such debit consistency and movement to the troops to modify the situation until turning it around and I will not lack sure to be useful" ⁽¹⁵⁾.

Even if the sluice of the letter pointed out to a possible limelight of the situation is doubt that the hope was much advanced to pessimism. For how much, then, it concerned the employment to mass of aviation, "*confidential answer* - Gariboldi telegraphed - *as soon as they will be noted possibility German co-operation*" ⁽¹⁶⁾.

The succeeding days were characterized by the impulse and the dynamism given by Rommel to the operating activity. The 14th, at 18:30, arrived in the port of Tripoli the first German contingent: the 3rd exploring group and the 39th *Panzerjaeger* group. The outflow had beginning immediately and continued for all the night in the light of the reflectors, while the fighters intercrossed irregularly on the sky of city ⁽¹⁷⁾. At 11 of the morning following the units were in formation in front of the palace of the government. For two or three times they

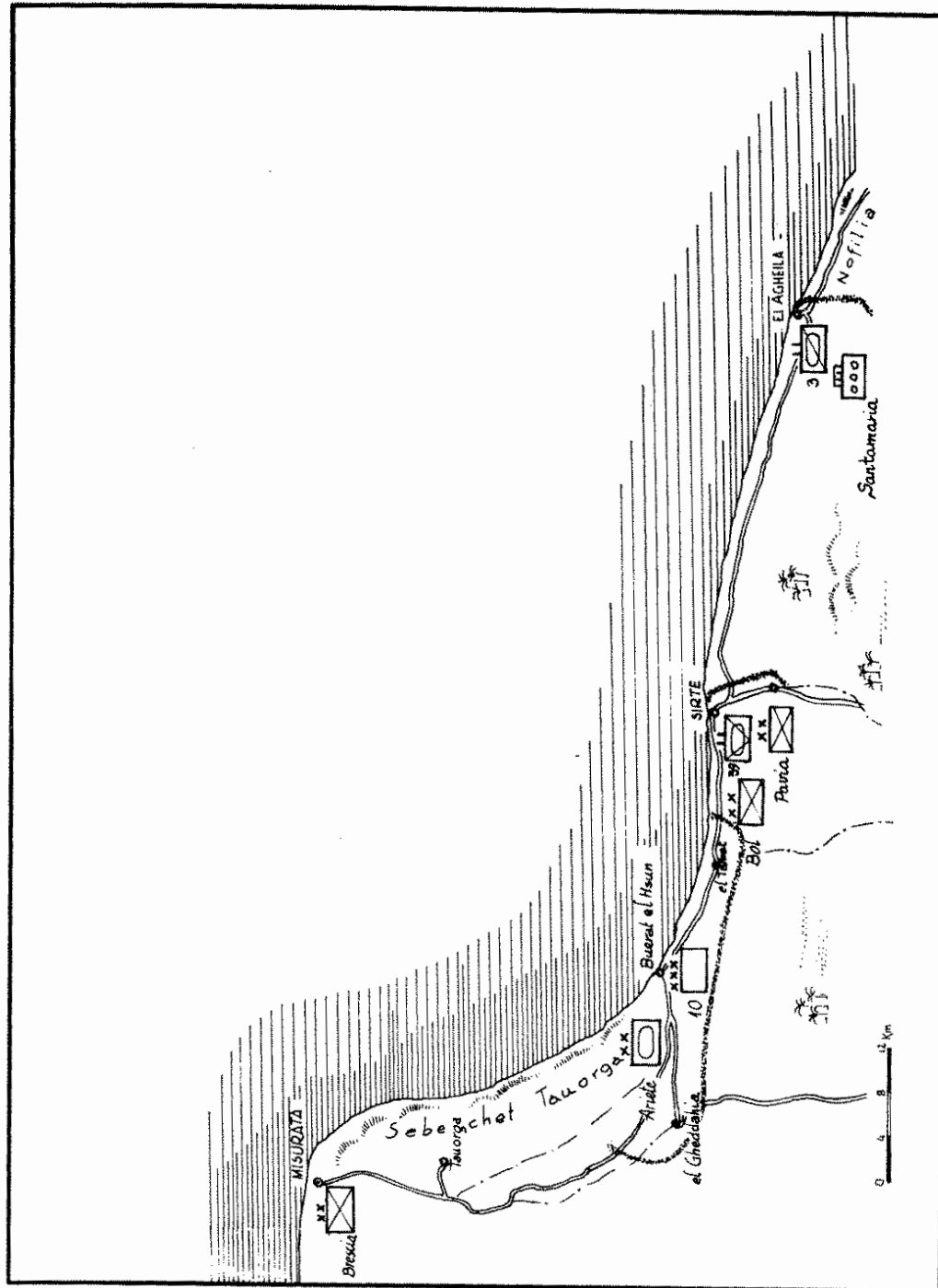
they paraded in front of Gariboldi and Rommel to give the impression of being much more numerous mixture of forces than they real were - the impression that sure would have arrived also to the enemy - then they left towards the front. In the late afternoon to they were at Misurata, in that one following reached Sirte the Santamaria column, the most advanced Italian unit ⁽¹⁸⁾.

Immediately Rommel sent Col. Schmundt back to Berlin in order to speed up, through Hitler, the shipment of remaining of the expeditionary corp. He was rather satisfied. He had spoken with Gen. Baldassarre, commander of the *Ariete*, communicating to that the division it was destined to pass to his command. It did not preview initiatives from the British side, also ignoring the entity of the contingent spotted between Agedabia and el-Agheila, and, in order to continue in the action of deceit, had ordered to the preparation of fake tanks ⁽¹⁹⁾. The 17th he wrote in his diary: "*They are in relationships than more optimal with the Italian Command and I could not myself be augured a better collaboration. My boys are already at the front, that they have moved to the east by 350 miles. For how much it regards to me, the others can also come*" ⁽²⁰⁾. In the meantime the X Army Corps (Gen. Albeno Barbieri) was in march towards Sirte, groups given to the shortage of motor vehicles, not individual units just disembarked came under way towards the east and 5th Light Division (gen. Johannes Streich) was arriving. The temporary alignment was based on a defensive position to the height of Sirte, entrusted to the divisions *Pavia* (Gen. Pietro Zaglio) and *Bologna* (Gen. Mario Marghinotti) and supported by the *Ariete* (Gen. Ettore Baldassarre), located to long back to the Balbia road, from Tamet Hassan to el-Gheddahia; a containment position to the height of Homs, held by the rests of the *Sabratha* division (Gen. Guido Della Bona), more behind the fort Commander of Tripoli (Gen. Carlo Spatocco) ⁽²¹⁾ with the divisions *Savona* (Gen. Pietro Maggiani) and *Brescia* (Gen. Banolo Zambon); covering the Tunisia frontier and elements of safety at Garian and in the Fezzan; finally the garrisons of Cufra and Giarabub, still a foot, isolated. To east of Sirte there was a light outpost of Lt. Col. Wechmar (3rd scout group and 39th *Panzerjaeger* group) and of Maj. Santamaria, push the 20 at en-Nofilia (sketch no. 2).

The Italian force present on the date of 20 February amounted to 5,900 officers and 123,000 non-commissioned officers and troop ⁽²²⁾, with a pair of months of provisions. The motor vehicles were approximately 5,000, of which 1,300

Schizzo n. 2

IL DISPOSITIVO AVANZATO ITALO-TEDESCO AL 20 FEBBRAIO 1941



SITUATION OF THE FORCES LOCATED IN LIBIA ON THE DATE 20 FEBRUARY 1941

Units	Officers	Non-commissioned officers	Troops		Horses, mules and asses	Camels
			national	Libyan		
X Army corps	1,206	1,334	21,376	-	1	-
entrenched camp of Tripoli (1)	1,849	1,758	33,966	5,127	3,495	149
Fortress of Tripoli	343	421	6,254	1,398	107	39
R.C. Libyan troops	39	81	180	949	9	-
Royal Navy	77	178	1,149	77	-	-
Royal Air force	467	565	5,481	742	-	-
Black shirt Legions M.V.S.N.	60	82	685	-	-	-
Libyan Sahara	149	225	735	3,696	5	2,207
territorial Units (2)	409	898	5,420	3,075	913	403
Command Sup. FF AA. A.S. (3)	1,301	1,541	24,929	753	128	8
Totals	5,900	7,083	100,175	15,817	5,658	2,806
		123,075				

(1) Including the G.a.F.

(2) Metropolitan and Libyan territorial Agencies - Groups CC.RR. Tripoli and Misurata - Detachment R.G. of Finance - Command group CC.NN. legions of Libya.

(3) Including organs and plants of intendancy and sector of Giarabub.

Units	Rifles and Muskets	Machine-guns	Guns			Mortars	Tanks
			c.c	c.a.	other types		
X Army corps	20,400	1,095	21	39	220	222	209
entrenched camp of Tripoli (1)	38,635	2,593	68	8	373	248	-
Fortress of Tripoli	7,411	433	-	72	53	36	-
R.C. Libyan troops	1,128	12	-	-	1	-	-
Royal Navy	609	93	-	15	32	-	-
Royal Air force	5,000	-	-	22	-	-	-
Black shirt Legions M.V.S.N.	580	34	-	-	-	-	-
Libyan Sahara	7,128	350	10	22	13	12	-
territorial Units (2)	16,513	446	-	-	-	5	-
Command Sup. FF AA. A.S. (3)	42,178	393	20	18	30	77	-
Totals	139,582	5,449	119	196	722	600	209
			1,037				

not working; tanks 209. The fuel supplies were around four months. Naturally any arrival of Italian and German units accompanied by a correspondent increment of need was not destined to lower of the levels.

Roatta, than in days 18, 19 and 20 had visited the entire alignment between Sirte and Homs, reported to the Comando Supremo:

"(...) All the troops which overall (...) are in the best conditions than moral and of physicist. Outcome not to declare that in the first lines and the smallest isolated detachments much more serenity states and confidence that in the far roman rear (...).

To the effect state of the things, will not be reached until the entire German 5th division & is not constituted, as previewed, with it and with the division *Ariete* a sufficient mobile mass, & until aviation has not exceeded the crisis of effectives and of bases, the situation offered still very unknown (...)" ⁽²³⁾.

The situation of the air force was considered under two distinguished profiles: the engagement on the channel of Sicily and Malta and the fight in North Africa. Based on the passed agreements between the two undersecretaries of State for the Air Force, Mar. Erhard Milch and Gen. Francisco Pricolo, towards the middle of December 1940 began to flow in Sicily the X Fliegerkorps (Gen. Hans Ferdinand Geissler). IT had to be constituted by:

- two bombers groups with Ju 88 at Catania;
- a group of bombers and torpedo bombers with He 111 at Comiso;
- two groups of dive bombers of Ju 87 at Trapani;
- a group heavy fighters with Me 110 at Palermo;
- one squadron recon with Ju 88 at Catania;
- one mine laying squadron with He 111 at Catania;
- a transport group with Ju 52 at Reggio Calabria,

for total 276 aircraft. Moreover they would be sent nine heavy batteries and three light for the air defense of the airports, transmissions unit, services etc for a total of beyond 10,000 men. The Commander of the aerial body was installed at Catania. The X *Fliegerkorps* was assigned offensives tasks: attack to the marine traffic in the Mediterranean, collaboration with the R. Aeronautica; attack on the naval base of Alexandria and that sea and air bases of Malta; laying of mines in the Suez Canal and the adjacent ports. To the Italian air forces in Sicily ⁽²⁴⁾, comprising:

- 30th bomber wing with Sm 79;
- 1st fighter wing with Mc 200 and CR 42;

156th fighter group with CR 42;

278th and 279th torpedo bomber squadrons with S.79 ⁽²⁵⁾, was entrusted the protection of the national traffic with Libya, also previewing a tightened collaboration with the Germans for how much it concerned the defense of the air force bases and the service of supply to offensive missions.

The issue of the constituted commands a knot not easy resolved, since Mar. Milch supported that the X *Fliegerkorps* would have had to remain under the orders of Goering, which he would not have ever consented to yield to others the employment of the German aerial units. Sometimes Milch, among others, pointed out to the most personal habits of the commander in head of the Luftwaffe, to which "*for the impulsivities of his character, appealed to jump all the hierarchies, in order to speak by telephone ordering directly, as an example, to a artillery battalion commander to make or not to make a determined action*" For the Italian part opposed the inappropriateness to go decidedly against the unit commander, much more than from Berlin a timely and appropriated participation in a field was not possible therefore far away and in which operated for joint actions or complementary Italian air forces. After many arguments it was established that the X *Fliegerkorps* would have been placed under the command of Superaereo, than of would have framed the activity in a general design. But Goering... could directly have telephoned to the German commanders his own desires. Where these would appear unattainable to the Italian Command, Superaereo it would have to explain the reasons to the *Reichsmarschal*.

The action on Malta and the channel of Sicily had immediate beginning and with extreme vigor. Milch, to say the truth, had underrated the difficulties of the neutralization of the island and the obstruction of the channel and, for against, overhauled the possibilities of Germanic aviation succeeding; much to think that he could conclude the engagement in the term of a pair of months. He had wide way to change his mind, however to mid February the offensive was in full development, also in order to contribute to gain the time necessary in order to re-establish the situation in Libya. The success of O'Connor had been sweeping, in the literal sense of the term, and if the Italian land forces of the Cyrenaica had been almost destroyed, those airplane had lost every operating ability, to the point from not being able to oppose the enemy with effectiveness to whichever British initiative. The employment without saving of the 5th air squadron during the offensive of the English XIII Corp and the sudden retreat had determined a true mass slaughter of aircrafts: from 9 December to 6 February the losses of apparatuses for causes of

war or incidents amounted to approximately 400 airplane. For combat hardly remained a hundred efficient apparatuses, therefore located:

- 54th bomber group with Sm 79 at Misurata;
- 96th bomber group with Ju 87 at Misurata;
- 53rd bomber group with Sm 79 at Tauorga;
- 155th fighter group with G 50 at Misurata;
- 18th fighter group with CR 42 at Tauorga;
- 23rd and 15th fighter group with CR 42 at Sorman;
- 2nd fighter group with CR 42 at Castel Benito.

There were, then, three aerial observation groups, two of aviation for colonial garrison, two squadrons from maritime and land reconnaissance, one squadron medical aircrafts, two transport groups. The above-mentioned alignment was temporary: the base of Castel Benito was blocked beyond the limits of the precaution, the others introduced structural deficiencies of varied kind, all turned out excessive rearward in order above all to allow an effective participation on the enemy actions and on his rear. The Sm 79 was already demonstrated valid insufficient against scattered armored formations in motion or, therefore their employment was reduced essentially to reconnaissance. As far as the Ju 87, they were thought insufficient numerically for a consisting war action and, however, they had need of a strong fighter escort. The judgment of Rommel on upgrading of 5th Air Fleet was drastic:

"(...) the Italian aircraft are worn out – von Rintelen commented on 5 March in a report sent - and are not replaced; the pilots must perform miracles. The reconnaissance aircraft are old Caproni, unarmed and valueless, deadly only for those who fly them (...). The torpedo bombers are empiricists and rudimental. The only thing alive of value and the courage are the pilots: our aviator would surely refuse to fly the aircraft that are here, reasoning, cases of death (...)".

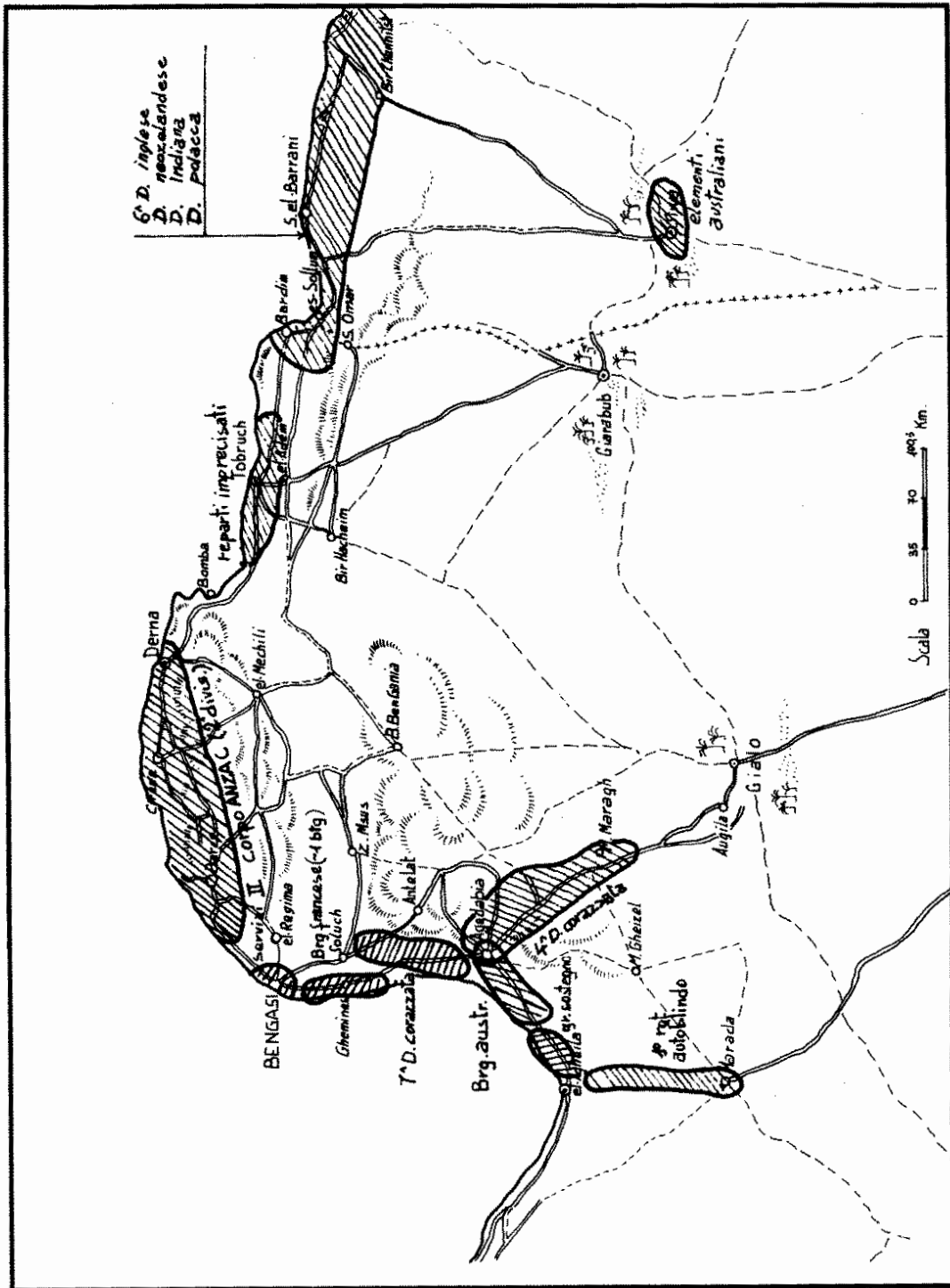
In short, the conclusions were reduced to the decision to improve as many and as quickly as possible the advanced fields of Tauorga, Tamet and Sirte and to prepare some new ones at Bir Dufan and, as soon as the circumstances allow, at Nofilia. The provision was prevailed also for being able to arrange in some way the German aircraft previewed to arrive: the X *Fliegerkorps* was in order to send to Tripolitania a share of Ju 87 and Me 110, under the orders of *Fliegerfuhrer Afrika* (Gen. Stephan Frolich). At the end of February, therefore, the situation of the available aircraft in North Africa was the following ⁽²⁶⁾:

Specialties	Type	Existing	Serviceable
Italian Bombers Fighters	SM 79	40	20
	Ju 87	10	10
	G 50	37	35
	CR 42	64	50
	Totals	151	120
Germans bombers	Ju 87	60	60
	Me 110	20	20
	Totals	80	80

The news concerning the enemy appeared alarming in its entity, very vague on its intentions. The reconstruction of the picture of battle made by the S.I.M. had been examined and accepted by German intelligence ⁽²⁷⁾. Between el-Agheila and Marada line turned out the support group to the 7th Armored Division and a armored car regiment; to south of Agedabia one Australian brigade and the 4th Armored Division; to south of Benghazi the bulk of the 7th Armored Division and the French motorized brigade; between Benghazi and Derna two divisions of the Australian-New Zealander Army Corps; at Tobruk imprecise units; to the border, between Bardia and Marsa Matruh, the British 6th division, a New Zealand division, an Indiana and one Polish (sketch n° 3). Seeing, soon, as this reconstruction was mistaken for excess; however, wrong or not, on it the military heads of the Axis had to be based and that explains the worries of all. For the truth much uncertainty existed on the proposed operation of Wavell, if that is he meant to continue the offensive aiming at the conquest of the Tripolitania. There had passed some weeks of inactivity, after the battle of Beda Fomm, but this did not constitute a sure indication since the British Commander had already given test to cure every the logistic preparation of offensive successive action, also to detriment of the continuity. The fast substitution of the units most worn away during the penetration in Libya and the intense inflow of materials found by our intelligence organs could confirm the idea of a resumption, than however it had to turn out tempting for the perspective of the conjunction with

Schizzo n. 3.

LA PRESUNTA SITUAZIONE BRITANNICA AL 28 FEBBRAIO 1941



friendly French garrisons of Tunisia beyond that for the law of the exploitation of success.

Against this hypothesis it was necessary but to hold account of the serious connected logistic difficulties with a prompt prosecution of a offensive to important distance from the lines of departure. Nor owing to other developments coming from direction of the Near East, that they went evidently assuming a worrisome tone, and from the impending threat, by now clearly perceivable had to be ignored from the event, of the German forces in the Aegean. All that could not induce Wavell to consider with insufficient favor a greater engagement of the forces towards the West, in the moment in which opening of new fronts he perhaps could compromise the acquired dominion of the eastern Mediterranean. As far as the remarkable movement of ships to the ports of Tobruk and Benghazi, the fact did not constitute a determining test for a preparation of advanced logistic bases in sight of a offensive resumption or for a suspension of the activity in the theater.

On the 28th Hitler wrote to Mussolini: *"In the North Africa, if they still remain in disposition fifteen day of time, they are sure that a new British attempt to advance towards Tripoli will fail"* ⁽²⁸⁾ and Rommel two days before had written to his wife: *"the next two weeks are decisive... The enemy knows by now that we are here and has begun to strengthen their positions"*. In fact, in order to impress the adversary with an aggressive attitude, the commander of the *Afrikakorps* had ordered to the two German units and the Santamaria column to push itself until to Nofilia and make contact with the English. The 24th the first action, concluded with the destruction of some British medium tanks and the capture of three prisoners, among which an officer, without any loss. The same day arrived online the 1st quick artillery regiment.

In Rome was a period of trusting tension. The counter-offensive in val Deshnices was imminent, in the Albanian theater. Gen. Gastone Gambara supported in a sword draft the possibility of a resolute action of his VII army corps and Cavallero had given to contagious enthusiasm and spoke already about exploitation of the success. Mussolini, since the end of November stretched to overturning the situation, on 2 March was introduced to Tirana, intention to withhold himself in Albania until to the conclusion of the counter-offensive. In this climate of optimism, deriving also

the most recent adhesion of Bulgaria at Tripoli and next by the German participation against Greece, 4 March Guzzoni convened the chiefs of general staff of the three Armed Forces in order to examine the Libyan situation. Held account of how much it precedes and considered the eventuality that the Germans, through Syria and Palestine, could exercise strongly in the course of time pressure on the Middle East, it became recognized the necessity to upgrade the forces of Gariboldi, first for its conquest of Cyrenaica and subsequently in order to proceed towards the Suez Canal. It came therefore estimated the possibility to transport to Tripoli approximately 6,000 motor vehicles and of again divided in the two troop reinforcements that would be made available overseas, much more than the hypothesis of the occupation of Tunisia did not have to be neglected. The same day Guzzoni communicated to von Rintelen, now head of the German military Mission of connection near the Italian Comando Supremo, that for the future offensive previewed for September, after the warm season, twelve divisions, of which three armored (one Italian and two Germans would have been employable).

The next day the Comando Supremo indicated to the General Staff of the R. Army and to the Ministry of War the program for the strengthening of Libya. Independently from the competition of Germanic major unit, the plan previewed: the completion of the Inf. Div. *Pavia, Bologna, Brescia* and *Savona*; the reconstitution of the Inf. Div. *Sabratha*; the strengthening of the *Ariete Arm. Div.* with M 13 tanks; the shipment of the *Trento Mot. Div.* and of two others organic divisions, let alone of supports and services of Army Corps and of the Army. In order to reinforce, then, the air defense of the port of Tripoli, which it by now made head the entire traffic from and for the Motherland and that it constituted therefore particularly appetizing objective for the aerial offense and naval adversary, was established the urgent shipment of groups and anti-aircraft batteries and searchlight positions.

Clearer, in any case, the thought of all: its re-conquest of the Cyrenaica could not take place before September. It was not only issue of the warm season, but also of force ratio and still it had moreover not been comprised which it was the plan of Wavell. After all, as Guzzoni to Gariboldi explained then, for the moment - and always that the enemy had not resumed the interrupted offensive - it was necessary to prepare themselves materially and psychologically. In this optical the Comando Superiore had to proceed to the study of the operating possibilities, graduating them in the time in relation, between the other, to predisposed inflow of troops ⁽²⁹⁾.

How much to el-Agheila and Marada, their occupation was without

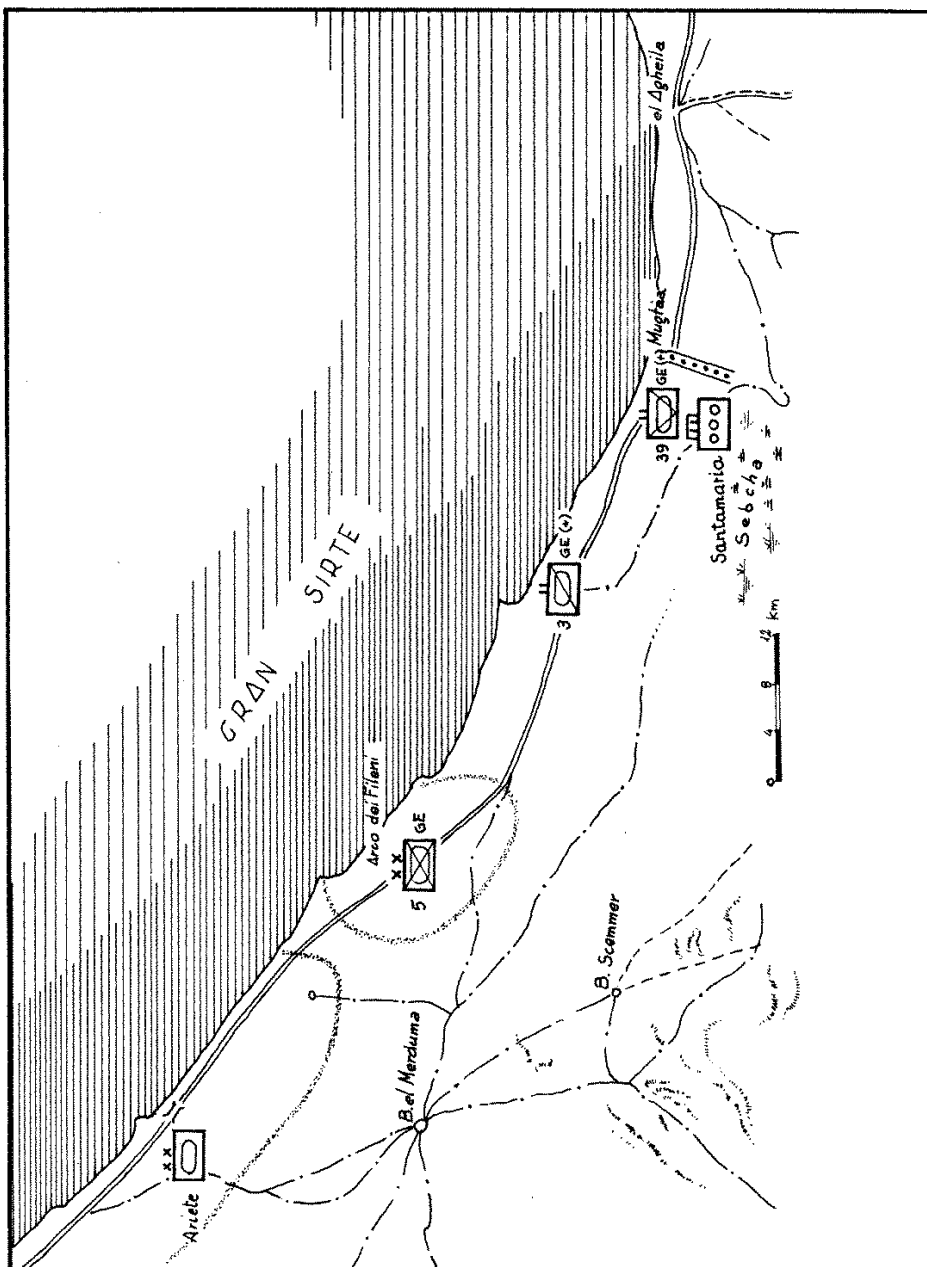
necessary doubt for future operations, but as long as these did not become imminent it did not seem opportune to move the two local sizable garrisons because: "*the two English armored divisions are in conditions more easy collecting themselves and to make mass in a determined point between Marada and Agheila which we cannot make*". Approximately their stable possession or the control with frequent patrolling, the choice came left Comando Superiore ⁽³⁰⁾. Gariboldi was more than convinced of the convenience not to take initiatives, especially of wide scope, before having re-united all that considered indispensable, but Rommel had other ideas for the front. It was not disposed to accept that the situation was static. Certain, the English behavior was inexplicable, considered the presence - from all tried deduction - of two armored divisions and an Australian army corps practically without work. To that what was from ascribing itself, therefore, the inertia that was protracted for some weeks? Null results on the hypotheses that Rommel had to agitate within it, however the self-confidence cannot not arouse some surprise with which since 9 March he ventilated to the OKW the possibility to attack around 8 May proceeding along the coast as long as the summery warmth had not stopped it.

In the meantime the 5th light division continued to disembark and its units as soon as they put foot to earth were started towards Nofilia. A lot in order to test determined the enemy outposts, Rommel to make an other small leap ahead. Was well aware that he cannot think of el Agheila, but to a score of kilometers before the locality the stronghold of el-Mugtaa is found, between the sea and *sebcha* Chebira, a salt swamp that it extends until approximately thirty kilometers to south of the Balbia road. The stronghold could constitute a good objective and on 4 March Gen. Streich, that for a few days had assumed the command of his own units and of the Santamaria column, it occupied the zone without to find some and immediately he hurried to undermine is the feature a stride the carriageway is one of the few passages through the *sebcha*. The new movement of the front, now approximately 120 kilometers from Nofilia and nearly 800 from Tripoli, said unexpected results: every reaction from English side not only lacked, but some retrograde movement was marked towards Agedabia (sketch n. 4).

As a result of such situation, on 7 March Rommel expressed to Gariboldi the purpose to occupy the oasis of Marada in order to avoid a encircling from the south. Gariboldi was shown in agreement online of

Schizzo n. 4

IL DISPOSITIVO AVANZATO ITALO-TEDESCO AL 7 MARZO 1941



the principle: the threat was real, but to his warning the occupation of Marada could be only achieved when the force conditions allowed it. In fact, the operation was tied necessarily to a movement on el-Agheila, in order to avoid the danger that the garrison left at Marada, obviously modest, could be swept up by enemy armored units coming from el-Agheila. It was dealt, all in all, to attend fifteen or so days, when the transfer of a division (probably the *Brescia*) to Mugtaa allowed adapted placement of troops. Rommel appeared persuaded. A regiment of infantry with some groups of artillery to release the units of the 5th light was enough, but expressed desire to continue to count on the Santamaria column. Gariboldi agreed with the appeals, then communicated that the *Ariete* could be considered a part of the *Deutsches Afrikakorps*, also being fed from the N. A. Intendenza ⁽³¹⁾. There was moreover another issue that preoccupied the Comando Superiore: the eventuality of an enemy invasion of certain capacity, inasmuch as in the circumstances it puts into effect had been forced to make confidence on the difficulties of the enterprise that on the means of countering it. But it is both Rommel and the Gen. Frolich assured that Goering had ordered the participation in mass of the X *Fliegerkorps* in a case of this sort.

On 9 March, therefore, the *Ariete* reached the bulk of the 5th light ⁽³²⁾ and immediately Rommel called Generals Baldassarre and Streich in order to give dispositions on the planned action. Premised that the zone of el-Agheila is considered as an exploration base, the tasks between the two major units were shared with precision. The 5th *Light Division* had to recognize the battlefield on the alignment of el-Agheila-Maaten Giofer in order to assure the prevalence of our land exploration; to occupy Marada with a Italian-German detachment; to hold under observation the Maaten Giofer-Marada track and to render it sure by means of continuous exploratory activity; finally, to assure the defense of the Mugtaa position with the support of a strong reserve destined to react against every attempt of encircling from south. The *Ariete* division had, instead, to keep itself ready with the bulk to the north-west of Ara dei Fileni, between Bir el-Haddadia and Bir Cahela in order to take part towards the south-east; it had to also exercise a constant control on the origins from the south, by means of intense patrol activity on the alignment Bir Scemmer-Oglet and Domran-Bir el Mucinia. On the 13 March Marada was occupied without to come into contact with the enemy ⁽³³⁾. The same day Rommel transferred his own Command

at Sirte and, being disembarked also the attended armored regiment of the 5 light, he began to consider the troops under his orders. The 5^a light ⁽³⁴⁾ answered to the requirements, but the *Ariete* did not appear to up to the situation. Type of tanks in part were showing the organic deficiencies revealed in the possibility of aerial and land recognition, of defense antitank and antiaircraft, in the connections and the engineers. It, therefore, made present explicitly that for a profitable employment it was necessary that in the course of four weeks the division was reinforced in ways to approach itself the efficiency of a *Panzerdivision* at least. He proposed therefore the allocation of a group of 150 mm artillery, of numerous armored exploring unit equipped with armored cars and one squadron of aerial observation ", to carry to the consistency of the regiment bersaglieres to the level of a brigade and that one of the transmissions units and engineers, each, to the level of a battalion.

Gariboldi answered rather dryly:

"The *Ariete* armored division is composed according to the organic established by the General Staff of the Army, reinforced with means of tank destroyer and antiaircraft machine-gunners.

Beyond the VII M 13 tank battalion, already in march, the division will receive between some weeks another M 13 tank battalion, in advanced constitution in Italy and its light tanks will be in great part (pane) armed with anti-tank guns.

Not being in a position to assign to them medium-caliber gun artilleries to follow the division in march and not even armored cars. If I will be allowed to make it later on, I will make it.

Until then, that Commander will have to adapt the task of the division to its possibilities of action. With regard to this I do not think it convenient to increase to the trucked troops (bersaglieres) in order not to change the appearance of the division and not to weight it down.

Visa vie reconnaissance aviation and the service of motor coaches you are to acquaintance of how much I have decided. In case of offensive operations, reconnaissance aviation will be adequately increased.

Finally the services have been adapted to the force of the division and the necessity of an adapted autonomy. If one only became necessary to increase this autonomy it can supply with particular columns of refueling and means of evacuation. ⁽³⁵⁾.

In short, the advanced commander had change the terms of the problem: in the impossibility to proceed to a substantial development of major unit, the necessity of adapt the tasks to the real operating ability was prevailed. Probably it would have been the case to invest the General Staff of the R. Army of the structural review of the armored division, inasmuch as the proposals came undoubtedly from competent source and that

the negative experiences of the 10th Army still burnt. But the contrast was deep. Just on indication of the Comando Superiore of the General Staff was proceeding with studies on the ordering of the infantry division, to base of which it was the concept of... making the maximum economy of trucks. The veiled solution considered:

- an exploring nucleus,
- two infantry regiments, each with two battalions and a battalion infantry support weapons;
- a battalion divisional infantry-support weapons;
- a regiment artillery with three groups from field (two of 75 mm and of 100 mm) and a mixed antiaircraft;
- a mixed battalion of the engineers;
- various service units.

Altogether this type of major unit previewed 6,000 men, 650 motor vehicles, 141 guns machine gunners and machine-guns, 40 AT. guns, 56 pieces of 47/32 and 40 machine-guns of 20 millimeter, 24 81 mm mortars and 36 field pieces. It is not the case to stop itself on such hypothesis, than, between the other things, always in order to contract the number of the trucks, had affected even the equipments, having reduced therefore the logistic autonomy; but it is meaningful proceeding to attempted organic modifications without before determining with precision which tactical tasks were wanted to be entrusted to the division and to which requirement it had to answer. Nevertheless, if not other, were two modules effectively experiments which to inspire itself: that British and that German, the enemy and the allied.

As it has been said, Rommel had made to send his plan to Berlin. The idea also reached Rome. On 12 March, in fact, the Gen. von. Rintelen communicated to Guzzoni that the OKW attributed much importance to the maintenance of the occupation of the oasis of Giarabub, especially in sight of a possible counter-offensive. To the need it estimated necessary not to delay, or better to accelerate the transport of the 15th *Panzer*, also to cost to slow down the program of Italian development and it was declared, all adding, favorable to the suggested partial offensive from Rommel. Always according to the OKW, before 20 April consider it possible to move the 15^a *Panzer* to Africa and also to put before the Italian divisions. Of course, all the interested divisions had to be motorized, yes to be able to execute long and expresses movements.

The Comando Supremo, in a study dated 15 March, not excluded of being able to receive such plan, not just in Libya also

the *Trento* Mot. Div., provided that the operation remained limited to the attainment of Agedabia, important objective in the how many local tracks passing through covering the pre-desert to south of the *gebel*, but not to exceed it in order not expose it to the enemy threat along said tracks. Moreover the offensive for retaking of Cyrenaica could not begin before August, according to the approximate calculation of the availability of the reinforcements.

The excessive warmth, then, of it imposed the dismissal to the middle of September. On this base 18 March Guzzoni newly convened the three chiefs of general staff. Reassumed the events in the Balkan theater of operations (the Germans had to begin operation *Marita* in Greece first of April; English had disembarked troops in Greece taking from the forces of the Middle East; various news made to think imminent the adhesion of Yugoslavia to the Tri-party), therefore was expressed in the cares of the Libyan theater:

- "- our advanced occupation is found 26 kilometers to the west of Agheila, it takes advantage of a *sebca* in order to limit the amplitude of the front and to Marada;
- Gen. Rommel, dynamic and dared temperament, would want to push ahead, but, considered that until when a good consistency has not been arrived that he could still make the game of the adversary, a little water is being thrown on the fire;
- until when, they have arrived in situated, to the suit, the German 5th (light) and 15th (armor) divisions and the *Ariete* has not been opportunely upgraded the armored division cannot itself be thought next to the offensive;
- it is moreover necessary to consider that the armored troops must be followed by motorized units and to such scope they are adapted in action provisions;
- the General Staff of the Army must make computes exact of what it is previewed to have in place for the first half of May;
- if for such age the means are sufficient, it will be able to be thought of having to disposition for the operations in a month approximately. The warmth will then force necessarily to the pause until September. ⁽³⁶⁾.

Approximately the modalities of action, Guzzoni considered two hypothesis. Before it was translate in a daring action that, carried itself along the coast it headed decidedly at Tobruk: the enterprise demanded an adapted logistic preparation having to be fed for a long line of supply. The second one was less shining and it was limited to stretch to the possession of the western slopes of the *gebel*, beyond Benghazi. Also accepting this second design, the aspiration to a prompt attainment of military successes hit against serious difficulties of organizational order, since was also always dealt to gain a great battle. In short, in part the convenience to take

a decision after a careful comparison between requirements and possibility, Guzzoni became account of the absolute necessity to avoid failures and this consideration made him to predispose for the surer solution.

Rommel had been called to Berlin. Meaning to brief Hitler his total plans, he prepared a long and detailed report, particularly interesting in how much it reflects the thought which he will give often run with actions of unilateral initiative. Premised the famous approximate situation of the somewhat superior enemy to truth ⁽³⁷⁾, he considered that the bulk of the British forces of the Middle East he would be engaged for next the two months, Both for the operations in course in East Africa and for the threat that were being delineating against Syria, bound to the government of Vichy: in case of success express Italian-German their competition was therefore to be considered later. In the same way the purpose of an offensive against Tripoli had to be judged momentarily improbable. English will do all in order to hold Cyrenaica, argued, as element of safety for the possession of Egypt. They sure would have pushed the effort for a prompt victorious conclusion of the fight in East Africa, to the aim to recover troops and to be able to reemploy them or for the offensive on Tripoli or to reinforce the defense of Cyrenaica, according to the circumstances. The front a threatening initiative of the such Axis effort would be reached in delay. Of it offensive resumption derived the character of our particular urgency, than, however, it would have found an imperative limit to its duration in arrival of the great summery heat. Holding account of all this, Rommel continued:

"(...) Therefore for the conduct of all the operations the month of May only remains available. And necessary therefore that every preparation is concluded for the end of April.

The scope of an attack operation can be only the heart of Egypt (Alexandria, Cairo, Suez Canal). The limitation to retake Cyrenaica means only to retake territory (...). The entire operation must be uniform in two strokes: to then strike the English army in Cyrenaica and breakthrough [= irruption] on to Cairo.

For the continuation of the offensive operation towards Egypt the definitive express annihilation of the English Army in Cyrenaica is premised. Because this goal is obtained must for means of aviation of the Sicily and of Greece, as also for means of the full employment of the Italian Navy, rejecting the English fleet in the eastern therefore that the marine way for the transport of supplies prepared in Italy (Naples), to Benghazi and Tobruk is assured with the beginning of the operations in Cyrenaica. If as succeeding exploitation of the first one could be carried out a fast trip with weak forces towards Egypt, it will turn out from the development of the situation (...). ⁽³⁸⁾.

The English Armored Corp and that one of Australian infantry it was necessary counter the reinforced *Deutsches Afrikakorps* ⁽³⁹⁾, three Italian motorized divisions (including the *Ariete*) to the continuation of the German corp for the maneuver and others three divisions of infantry in second formation, to make close by echelon. Also the Italian divisions, obviously, had to receive numerous reinforcements and to be supported by suitable adapted support of superior order ⁽⁴⁰⁾. On par it was necessary to upgrade the 5th air wing ⁽⁴¹⁾. Based on the principle to quickly put outside cause the bulk of the British troops presents in Cyrenaica before they could flow reinforcements, Rommel proposed themselves to strike in succession of times the opposing divisions, widely spaced out in long depth the coast. Established that the main director of the offensive had to head at Tobruk, only the large port. that English could use, for it achieved the following design of maneuver: to get hold preliminarily of the zone of enemy safety between el-Agheila and Agedabia; to stretch then to occupy, possibly of surprise, the enemy advance positions of Marsa el-Brega and the narrows of es-Seghira; in case English had already withdrawn, to make an ulterior leap until to Agedabia. The battle of Agedabia, whose scope was the annihilation of the British armored corp, constituted the decisive phase of all the operation.

If the enemy had accepted the action previewed probable the application, from part, of the tactics already put in practical previously: to contain frontally the attack and to react with the lateral maneuver of the tanks. A defensive attitude held with the armored units was very much hypothetical, given the desert atmosphere where an attack could be manifested from every direction. In any case - and this was condition *sine qua non* (Latin: *without which not*) - the enemy had to be attacked and to be destroyed by the Italian-Germans armored forces *before* thinking to a development in depth of the operations towards Tobruk. Reaching the decision, favorable, at Agedabia, the second phase would be begun. One frontal with the mass of the Australian forces located between Benghazi and Derna did not seem to offer a rapid and decisive success. It was prevailed, therefore, the encircling of the massive *gebelico*, through the desert, in order to reach the coast to the flank of the adversary, to block withdrawal of the Anglo-Australians troops remaining in Cyrenaica and to engage them in a decisive battle in order to prevent them to escape for the south or via the sea. The protection of the flank of the advanced columns to the north of Agedabia against possible Australian reactions or their part of

of the English forces located still more to the east had to be assured by means of special units.

As far as the supply, excluded the possibility to make head at Tripoli once begun the operations, did not remain that to proceed to the urgent constitution of an advanced logistics center, to the front margin of the waiting position, and to make use, as long as the circumstances allowed, also of the marine transports. For this purpose it was necessary to prepare numerous floating cabotage and to increase the tonnage available for the convoys from Italy. In order to facilitate the movement in ahead of the logistic organization during the development of the advance, it became important to decide of the possession of a port (Marsa el-Hilal, Derna, Bomb, Ain el-Gazala, Tobruk) for the system of new logistics base, independent from that one of Tripoli.

One demanded principle formulated in the picture of the definition of the scope of the offensive deserves prominence:

"The full employment of all the troops that are in Libya and of the Italian troops of reinforcements that will come from Italy must be guaranteed. From the Italian Comando Superiore it must moreover be assured that, in the spirit of all the conduct of the war, at least the Italian quick divisions, the Italian air weapon and Italian Navy come put to disposition for the continuation of the offensive towards Egypt. On the conduct of all the operations of attack towards east, to the C. T. A. [German Corp of Africa] must be granted to a wide influence [= autonomy] in order to guarantee the unit of action ".

The two concepts, of independence from the Comando Superiore North Africa Armed Forces and of the push on the Cairo after to have battered the British forces in Cyrenaica, constituted for Rommel two firm points and the source of the discord with the Italian ally and also with the superior Germans.

Some consideration on the memory can be made. In tightened synthesis: two distinguished maneuvers, retaking of Cyrenaica and advancing towards the Suez Canal. First they untie the two points. The first, that it would be culminated in the battle of Agedabia, had to be concluded before the summer. That successive, advance on Tobruk, could more or less happen before the great warmth. The second maneuver regarded tomorrow not very defined, but "*if as succeeding exploitation of the first could be carried out a fast episode by weak forces towards Egypt, it will turn out from the development of the situation*". In line none of the principles objected. The affirmation that deserves relief in a similar natural atmosphere the territory did not count: the Italian Commands,

at least in a generalized manner, up to now had shown themselves reluctant to accept it. As far as the means and the reinforcements, the minimum that can be commented for the Italian part is that if Graziani had had them probably the things would have gone differently. Of other part, the demands not only found insufficient correspondence in the Italian camp, but also in the German, a lot that they will remain in great measure unsatisfied, creating since the beginning an unfavorable imbalance that impress to the entire campaign a constant character of risk.

On 20 March Rommel was received by Hitler, who began the audience presentation of the oak cluster for the brilliant behavior held in France at the head of the 7th armored division. But Mar. Walther von Brauchitsch, commander in chief of the army, removed at once every illusion specifying that for near future any offensive in great style in Africa was not previewed and that for moment was not to be awaiting reinforcements. Rommel tried to insist, but in vain. It could not be explained that it was evolving operation *Barbarossa*. Gen. Franz Halder, the head of the OKW, was quite hostile in principle:

"In that age - it had to observe more late - I did not make that to repeat to Field Marshal von the Brauchitsch that, with the Mediterranean dominated by English, the maximum we could allow was sent to Africa and to supply three or four divisions... Sooner or later the situation would be time to favor of the Italians but, how much the more along we could have avoided it, even for years, how much better it would have been... Rommel asserted that he would be very soon successful to get hold of Egypt and the Suez Canal, and then spoke about a German East Africa. For my part I did not succeed to hide an ironic smile and to have certain point I have asked him that what would have been necessary to get that goal. He has answered me that it would have had need of another pair of armored divisions. I have asked: "*Even if he had them, as it would means to supply them of materials and provisions*". He had the classic answer: "*he had not considered that*". These are his affairs!" ⁽⁴²⁾.

Von Brauchitsch concluded saying that after the arrival of the 15th *Panzer*, at the end of May, he had to be limited to give battle at Agedabia and, perhaps, to retake Benghazi ⁽⁴³⁾. on 23 March, after return from Berlin, Rommel was stopped in Rome and he was introduced to Guzzoni, with Col. von Rintelen, insisting on the necessities acting to more soon, in order not to find himself of in front to greater English forces, eventually recovered from the theater of East Africa. The motivation was rather opinionated, since if truly between Cyrenaica and Egypt the English had a good 17 divisions further reinforcements would have been superfluous, however the end of

May constituted the maximum term for the beginning of the counter-offensive.

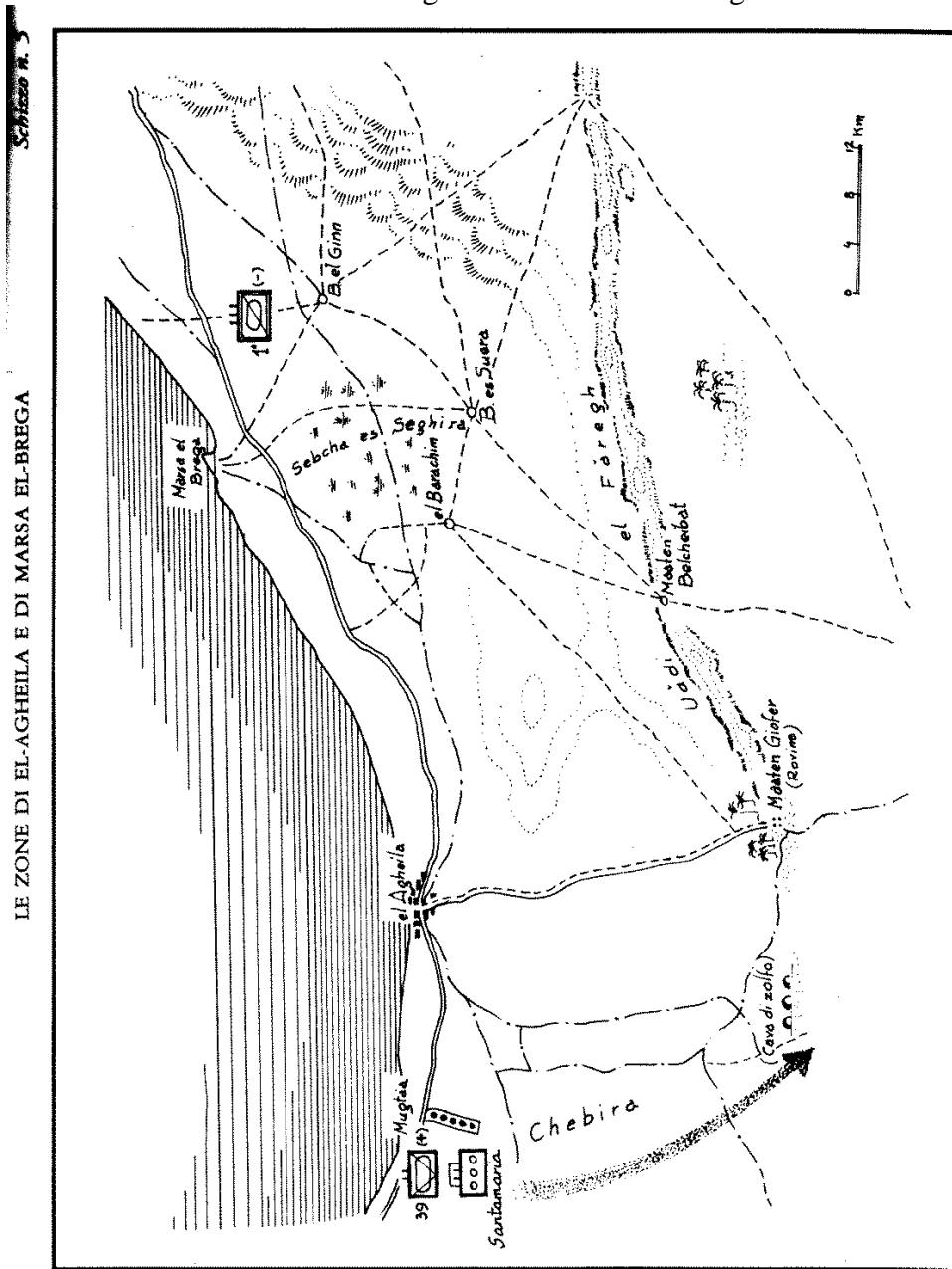
Guzzoni, than from Gariboldi while had received copy of the memo of Rommel, agreed online of principle and expressed just the thought on the development of the operation. First phase: to strike the enemy forces between Agedabia and Benghazi, being watched itself the right flank, to the height of Msus, from the origins of Mechili. The second phase: to continue on Tobruk. In case the action of the first phase had succeeded ready decisive, could have change the terms of the orders: to watch themselves from the origins Benghazi and to point with the bulk of the mechanized troops for Msus at el-Mechili and Tobruk. It was necessary however to hold account that the operation was subordinated to the availability of motor vehicles and with regard to it he assured that would have been made every effort in order to send some in the greater number and as soon as possible. The day after Guzzoni signaled to von Rintelen, leaving for Berlin, the more pressing issues for the Comando Supremo and that, for how much he regarded North Africa, consisted in two points: war booty and the 15th Panzer. The shipment from Germany part of the trucks and French war booty tanks was urgent, already promised, without which it would not have been possible to motorize the divisions in Libya.

He was also urgent the transport of the 15th Panzer, so that it was already in situated for the middle of May.

Rommel very was persuaded of having to take advantage of the momentary British weakness in the theater of operations of the Middle East for reassignment. As soon as in Tripoli he hurried to inform Gariboldi that his plan had been approved. For the operation, in Rome they had been promised seven divisions of first formation. Also Gariboldi agreed in a generalized manner, but it transmitted to the Comando Supremo new demands for means and supplies thought necessary, beyond the units already listed by Rommel. On this occasion he noted how the rhythm of the marine transports carried out until that date ⁽⁴⁴⁾ you could make sure to dispose of everything you need for the time established and ended up reaffirming the opportunity not to take major initiatives before the total turnout required ran out.

But there was another. Before leaving for Berlin, Rommel had personally charged Gen. Streich with the occupation of el-Aghèila, advanced point of the enemy position, from which irradiated continuous harassments to our columns of supply for the tactical group garrisoning the oasis of Marada. The morning

. Areas of el Agheila and Marsa el-Brega



of the 24th, so the German 3rd recon group and Italian tactical group reached the goal and also took possession of the nearby water wells and the airfield. The enemy, a weak detachment that had mined the ground thickly around the old Turkish Fort, he took to the attack. Also the aerial reconnaissance reported an English retrograde movement tending to bring the security system close to Marsa el-Brega (sketch No. 5). The small episode will have an unexpected result.

On the 28th Guzzoni wrote to Gariboldi, agreeing on the gradualness with which it was intended to transform the defensive deployment into offensive:

"in the current situation-he added-in which our inferiority of motorized and armored forces are still sensitive, while mobile G.U., easy to release, can and should (as you did) to be pushed forward, in contact with the enemy, to oversee them and combat it in the event of a rebound offensive, the G.U. of infantry are still the most suitable locations on the chosen location for the battle of arrest.

In relation to this concept, which You also, prospect, Excellency, to not bring forth other non- mobile Grand Units beyond the *Brescia*, on the contrary would agree that our defensive situation, withdraw the positions of Sirte, as soon as you can replace it with the *Trento* or 15th armored.

When you will feel our current defensive lineup definitely solid and a possible enemy offensive unlikely revival, you can then examine the opportunity to withdraw a Division, in turn, in the area of the oasis of Misurata and of Zliten, to rest troops from their time in the *sirtico* desert". ⁽⁴⁵⁾.

All in all it was much more comments-than directives-in full command Over competence, however it is good to emphasize the general tone of caution.

In Rommel's first doubts were rising on British forces actually present in Cyrenaica in the West. Situation report No. 1 on 21 March DAK alluded to the disappearance of two of the three Australian divisions considered existing and expected abandonment in South Benghazi and the *gebelica* area to offer battle at Tobruk- Sollum. The upper Command was convinced of the correctness of deductions and expressed the opinion that between Derna and Ajdabiya existed more or less forces that had participated in the invasion of Cyrenaica, and that is 50,000 men with thousands of armored vehicles and armor (*Bren carriers* including) and 200 pieces of artillery. As for the British attitude was entirely unlikely a retreat on

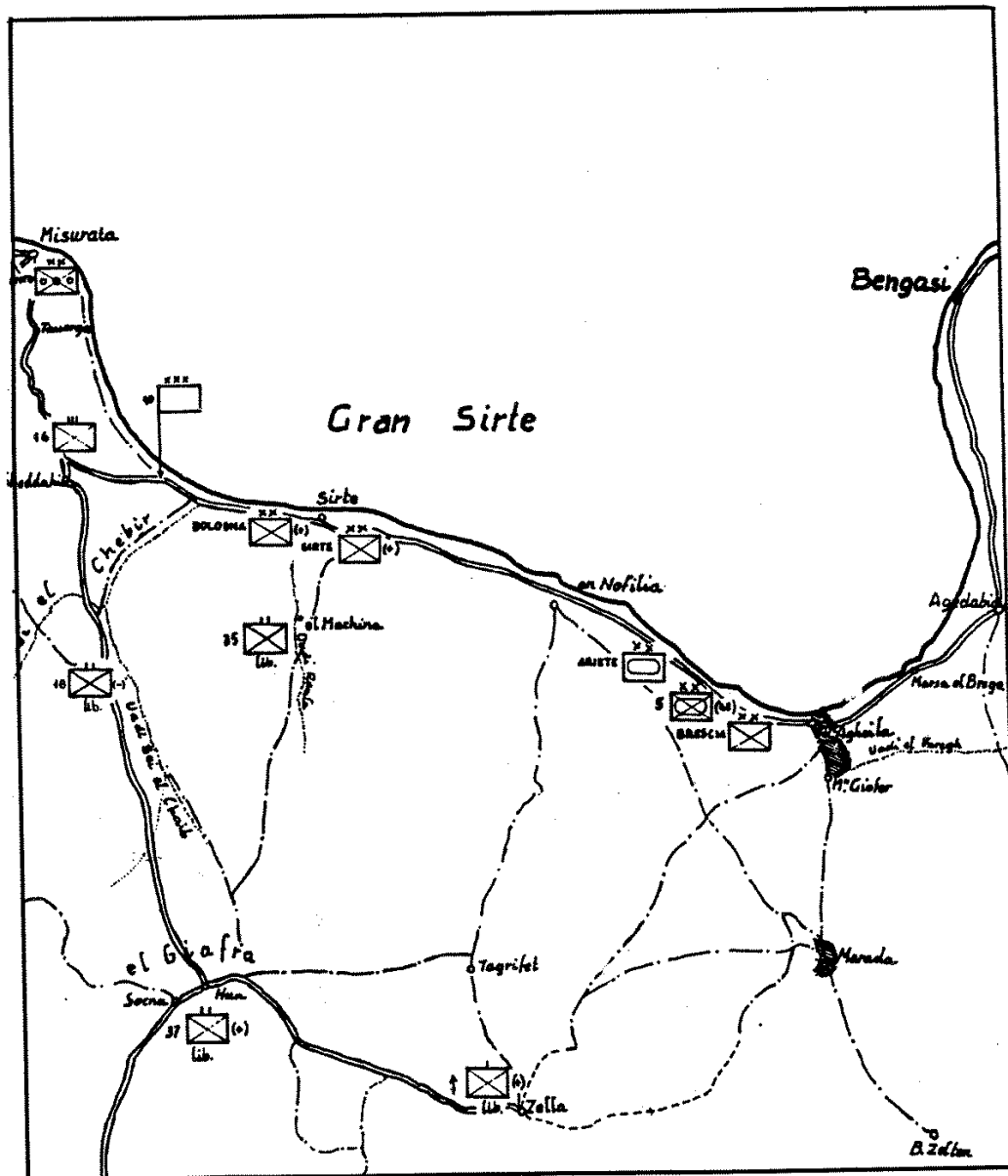
Tobruk- Sollum as the *gebelica* area offers advantages of climate, local resources and unique tactics throughout the territory between Benghazi and the Delta. Therefore it was considered, on the contrary, that the *gebel* was tenaciously defended. Finally, this strange, after the events of January-February.

Rommel never tired to re-assess the situation. The narrows of Marsa el-Brega, into which the advanced British elements were to retreat, represented the first step of the Italian-German counter-offensive. The British had occupied the surrounding heights starting defense accommodation. Where he left them time to strengthen the positions of Marsa el-Brega and Bir es-Suera, South of Seghira *sebcha* with protective barbwire and minefields, very difficult would become attack that cornerstone or attempt to circumvent it from the South, since the soil over the Wadi Faregh, about forty miles from Marsa el-Brega, was very sandy and difficult road for vehicles. It was, therefore, the alternative of waiting until the end of May the arrival of all troops, allowing the enemy to organize conveniently or attacking Marsa el-Brega, not yet consolidated, with the modest forces available at the time. As Marsa el-Brega constituted at the same time a good defensive position and good base for the counteroffensive "*I decided-wrote Rommel-for the second solution, believe that, despite the small size of our forces, attacking at that moment we could still make sure have the narrows*" ⁽⁴⁶⁾. Contrary to popular thought, the Commander of the *Afrikakorps* not silent about their intentions, at least to Gariboldi. On the 29th, in fact, had with him an interview during which he proposed to bring forward, gradually, the order up to Marsa el-Brega, linking the possession of this position with the road to Marada. A battalion of the *Bologna*, reinforced, would be transferred to the narrows, while the *Brescia*, left the line of el-Mugtaa, would be deployed to the Southwest, keeping behind the *sebcha* of Seghira and checking the backgrounds from the Wadi Faregh. On the rear of *Brescia* would have placed the 5th light, and the *Ariete* would have occupied the positions of el-Mugtaa. Gariboldi nodded looking, indeed, that the big units were employed by Rommel and these, therefore, could give "*orders remain directly intended that the advance will be gradual*" ⁽⁴⁷⁾. (sketch No. 6).

The action of March 31 was not, in essence, conceived as the

SITUAZIONE ITALO-TEDESCA
AL 30 MARZO 1941

Schizzo n. 6



early shot of the great counter-offensive, but as simple operation of adjustment, in view of the note, major undertaking, to face two months later. Outstanding ensuing results were totally unexpected at that time and were the result of improvisation, one step after the other on the way up and happy exploitation of success.

After the interview, Gariboldi responded to the Comando Supremo:

“I take note with satisfaction of the concordance of this general staff, to the concept not to start the offensive until there is a working footnote everything to (...), ”.

Then, however, formulated several objections to the suggestions of Guzzoni. The position of Sirte did not offer any advantageous tactical holds, while the advance of el Agheila, and further the narrows of Marsa el-Brega, lay in the ground longer valid and therefore better suited to static defense. The line at el Agheila-Marad appeared likely to frustrate opposing offensive ambitions and occupation, pushed a little further along on the coast, would better guarantee the way el Agheila-Marada, along which could comfortably carry supplies to Marada, where, among other things, it was possible to make an appreciable contribution to the water supply. Finally concluded:

“I'll add here, as an aside and to illuminate the situation, that I have my dependencies on Gen. Rommel which, as is well known, has a fever of the action, which is always taut and that, therefore, is for the approval of the Berlin, as for the formalized agreements there made about his addiction, not always easy to stop the impulses of the advance.

I was proposed, in view of conditions on land of mentioned move up our employment from Agheila to narrows west of Marsa el-Brega, both to improve the defense, making it firmer, both to protect the Agheila-Marada road. I support, provided that it would build progressively”⁽⁴⁸⁾.

Appears for the first time the inclusion of the “Rommel factor“ in elements of programming and operational execution for the axis forces. It is already clear that the pace of progression allowed Rommel's stress is considerably tighter than complying with the prudential directives of the Comando Supremo and, indeed, of the OKW. It is a process that often must be recognized in the evolutionary process of operational concepts: an initial impulse suggested by

fantasy, by intuition and the dynamism of Rommel, which opposed a cautious stance of the Italian Command, followed by a elastic holding action, destined to lead finally in full consent, when not forced to take the form of acceptance of the fait accompli. In this case – where, incidentally, it is not clear what the Comando Superiore intended for progressiveness of action about a rush of fifty kilometers - Rommel's initiative, gradually passed from the Italian Command, will give the events a course far more rapidly than planned and objectively – than - he himself believed. The date of 31 March, decided to carry out a limited maneuver, will turn soon in the starting date of the counter-offensive in May and, above all, the spectacular recapture of Cyrenaica. Even O'Connor was trying to do at the battle of Sidi Barrani thinking for a five-day incursion.

2. THE FORCES AND BRITISH INTENTIONS

The happy continuation of operation Compass had led, as we have seen, the conquest of the whole of Cyrenaica. For the Defense Committee, London, the situation now was clear: easy creation of a certain side in Libya would pay any thoughts on aid to Greece or Turkey.

“This excludes any serious effort against Tripolitania – wrote Churchill to Wavell- although demonstrative actions in that direction would be a useful ruse. You should therefore consolidate your position in Benghazi and concentrate all available forces in the Delta, in preparation for the movement towards Europe ” ⁽⁴⁹⁾.

The next visit to Cairo of Foreign Minister, Eden, and the Chief of the Imperial General staff, Gen. John Dill, held closed talks with the three commanders in Chief in the Middle East. On the 20th Eden reported to Churchill that, considering the troops staying in theatre of operations (chart on next page), Wavell intended to leave in Cyrenaica a Australian divisions less trained and equipped, a Indian Brigade, currently undergoing training, and the remains of the 7th Armored Division. For Greece have immediately thought of a brigade of the 1st Armored Division and the New Zealand Division, ready for boarding;

THE SITUATION OF THE BRITISH GRAND UNITS IN THE MIDDLE EAST IN
MID-FEBRUARY 1941

according to the S.I.M.	In reality (1)
<i>1. In Cyrenaica, ...</i>	<i>1. In Cyrenaica, ...</i>
7th Armored Division.	7th Armored Division
4 th Armored Division	two tank regiments of the 2nd Armored Division
an Australian Corps with two- -three divisions	6 th Australian Division
a French brigade	a French mot. battalion
<i>2. Libyan - Egyptian border...</i>	<i>2. In Egypt:</i>
6 th English Division	6 th English Division
New Zealand Division	New Zealand Division
a Polish Division	a Polish Brigade
a Indian Division	
<i>3. In Egypt:</i>	
a British armored Division,	2nd Armored Division (minus two tank regiments)
<i>London</i> mot. Division	
an English Division	
one Australian Division	
two Indian divisions	
a New Zealand Division	
<i>4. In Palestine</i>	<i>4. In Palestine, ...</i>
8 th English Division	
7 th Australian Division	7 th Australian Division
8 Australian Division	
1st English Cavalry Division	
<i>5 East Africa</i>	<i>5 East Africa</i>
4 th Indian Division	4 th Indiana Division
5 th Indian Division	5 th Indiana Division
1 st Anglo - Sudanese Division	
a French brigade	
1 st South African Division	1 st South Division
two-four divisions of the indigenous African Division	an African Division
12th African Division	

(1) Third Dispatch of Gen. Wavell on Operations in the Middle East from February 7, 1941 to 15th July 1941, sent to the War Office on 5/9/1941 and published as a supplement to the London Gazette on 2/7/1946.

subsequently, the Polish Brigade, two Australian divisions and, if required, a second armored brigade. Discussions about aid for Greece, however, lasted a long time and in conversations in Athens surfaced more than once discouragement in the face of the uncertainties of the Greek Government, that would not make hasty moves, such as to cause the German aggression.

In Northern Africa the command organization had undergone significant changes. Gen. Maitland Wilson was appointed Governor General and Commander in Chief of British forces in Cyrenaica; the Gen. O'Connor had replaced Wilson in Cairo, as Commander-in-Chief of the British forces in Egypt; the XIII Corps command had been disbanded and was replaced in its place the Australian Corps command (Gen. Thomas Blamey). As the troops of Cyrenaica, reduced to the well known 6th Australian Division (Gen. Iven Mackay) and 7th armored Division (Gen. Michael O'Moore Creagh).

The first had finished the campaign without any appreciable losses and on it could assign. The second, whose role was decisive, had suffered a very strong wear, so much so that only a small percentage of its armored vehicles had arrived at Beda Fomm. It is true that in December his two brigades (4th and 7th) were replaced by 3rd Hussars and 2nd *Royal Tank Regiment*, belonging to the 2nd Armored Division flowing to Egypt in early January, but don't forget that it had begun operations in June 1940 with the brigades incomplete and, anyway, now even the regiments reinforcement were exhausted.

As for the remaining large units stationed in the theater of operations, the 4th and 5th Indian Division were engaged at Cheren, Eritrea, while the 1st South African Division and the 11th and 12th African Divisions were mounting an offensive in Somalia and in the Galla-Sidamo. In Egypt, the New Zealand Division was ready, but always lacked a brigade, not yet moved by Great Britain; the 6th British Division, recently established and without artillery, was training on landing in the Dodecanese; the Polish Brigade was training underway and the 2nd Armored Division, which had already yielded two regiments to the 7th, was with *cruisers* in poor mechanical condition. Finally, in Palestine, there were two Australian divisions not yet trained (the 7th and 9th) and the 1st Cavalry Division) in part still afoot due to the shortage of vehicles ⁽⁵⁰⁾. This the framework in mid-February.

On 23 February the Greek Government finally agreed to help

Churchill and the British decided to send an expeditionary force. The fact of having to withdraw the 7th Armored Division from Libya to reorder, Wavell had no doubts. Since from the Italian side did not seem conceivable a counter-offensive and *Ultra* decryption had allowed to know the approximate date of arrival of a 5th Light (April) and 15th *Panzer* (May) ⁽⁵¹⁾, estimated to have a few weeks of peace and quiet. During this period Cyrenaica could entrusted to half of 2nd Armored Division and to the 6th Australian. The latter was to remain in Libya at least a month, and then would follow the 7th Australian to Greece. If not that Gen. Blamey argued the inappropriateness of sending the first up to the Balkan theater a division not yet and insisted on the departure of the 6th. Ensued a need of immediate replacement of this with the 9th Australian, in influx from Palestine and only partially trained and equipped.

Meanwhile, however, had begun disembarking of the first German units. Wavell wondered what could be the intentions of the Commander of the German contingent ⁽⁵²⁾, then, on the basis of expected arrival times of the two divisions, continued to think that there was still sufficient margin. On March 2 could then respond to Churchill, who had asked for an opinion on the situation, quite optimistic in tone. The latest information indicated that the recent reinforcements landed in Tripoli included two Italian infantry divisions (?), two Italian motorized artillery regiments and German armored forces equivalent to a Brigade to the Max. Distance relationships were significant: 760 km from Tripoli to el Agheila and more than 1,000 from Tripoli to Benghazi, with only one road and water wells for over 600 kilometers. All this, and the lack of means of transport, was seriously limited in respect of the actual possibility of the enemy. Probably it could feed along the via Balbia infantry divisions and one armored brigade for about three weeks, acting at the same time with a second Armored Brigade (if available) along the track of Hon and Marada, the desert, against the British left flank. It was conceivable a few probes to el Agheila and, in the case of weak resistance, a continuation to Ajdabiya to transfer to advanced aviation fields. Hardly, though, you could think to attempt to retake Benghazi. For an attack in style needed the two German divisions, which, together with the same number of Italian infantry divisions,

represented the maximum force refillable from Tripoli. "*Risks of maritime transport - continued Wavell - difficulty of communications and the approach of hot weather make it unlikely such an attack before the end of the summer*" and an effective intervention by the *Mediterranean Fleet* against the convoys and the *Royal Air Force* against Tripoli could lengthen the period.

To be honest indeed some prophetic predictions ventured, without knowing the temperament of Rommel. The head of intelligence service in appreciation of Wavell situation made March 5, they pose as German General and wrote, among other things:

"After preparing logistics, I think the German armored Corps, after a few weeks of training and experience in desert warfare and without substantial reinforcement of British troops in Cyrenaica, might undertake with success the reconquest of Cyrenaica" ⁽⁵³⁾.

Operational design was seen through three phases, in quick succession: first, give security to Tripolitania; the Second, re-occupy Cyrenaica; third, invade Egypt. A base would certainly be needed at Sirte, with an advance to Nofilia, and both for accommodation could not be made before April. After this date, therefore, the second phase was able to start. Two armored divisions (German and Italian), an Italian motorized and another four or five infantry divisions were pointed towards the North and North-East, along the Benghazi-Derna-Tobruk and Mechili-Tobruk, to then continue towards Bardia.

Wavell did not agree and persevered in him not believing the hypothesis of an Italian-German counteroffensive before May, possible very soon. The 5th Light seemed to have reach the front before March 24. It was to add the *Ariete* Arm. Div., with half of its tanks, and four infantry divisions still in shock of the moral disaster of the 10th Army. In a nutshell: no imminent threat to el Agheila. This piece, examination of logistical aspect was even more comforting. Rommel would have needed at least a month for the collection of materials needed to sustain any offensive, albeit limited to the forces which at the time he had, and by mid-April made a defense of Gen. Neame's more than enough to deal with a relatively small scale attack. The main card of Rommel, the 15th *Panzer*, wouldn't come until

May, then it would be a minimum of amalgam and acclimatization, so, on balance, would arrive in June and then Cheren would fall and one or two Indian divisions, and perhaps even the 1st South Africa, would have turned up in the Cyrenaican theater. The time seemed to play in favor of the British. The personal qualities of the new opponent could not overcome the laws of logistics. But no one knew Rommel yet.

On March 6, in a memoir, he developed his thought Wavell.: the increase of your opponent's forces was proving premature and excessive thinning of his departments in Cyrenaica. It was necessary to raise the quantitative and qualitative level of the troops remaining there, sending tanks units, anti-tank and anti-aircraft. As for the defensive maneuver, it seemed convenient to an elastic conception, rather than being forced to tensile strength, as had happened to Graziani. All in all, it was difficult to find an adequate response to the German threat, but it was necessary to avoid an initial reverse that could allow the enemy to buy immediately an overwhelming upper hand.

In London the framework outlined by Wavell was accepted as a satisfactory workaround, in the understanding that the el Agheila rift valley was held. After that position remained the possibility of a full armored battle of the desert, but the neither the conditions of the *Desert Air Force* nor those of ground troops they hope to achieve a positive result. For more on 4 March Gen. Wilson had left for Athens, as Commander of the British Expeditionary Force ⁽⁵⁴⁾, followed by Gen. Blamey with command of the Australian Corps. Replacing Wilson, Wavell had called Gen. Philip Neame from Palestine.

The situation of the air force was also suffering because of new commitments in Greece. Mar. Longmore had decided to withdraw from Libya two *Blenheim* squadrons, one *Hurricane* and one for cooperation with the army. Command of the *Desert Air Force* in Cyrenaica, entrusted to Col. Brown, included in March the 3rd Australian squadron (*Hurricane*) at Benina, the 73rd squadron (*Hurricane*) at Bu Amud, near Tobruk, the 55th squadron (*Blenheim IV*) at Maraua and the 6th squadron for cooperation with the Army (*Lysander*) in Barce, with a squadron at Ajdabiya.

On March 17 Gen. Dill wanted to take a look at Cyrenaica. Wavell accompanied him and with him went up to el Agheila,

via Antelat. Both realized immediately that any fighting in the desert area south of Benghazi would have been at the mercy of the stronger armored formation. The infantry couldn't have a say. The result of the inspection was not exciting. Dill, seems to have commented that he had the impression that the Corps would take "*a good woody* (spanking with a stick) *in the near future*", adding "*and this will not be the only place where this will happen*" ⁽⁵⁵⁾. Wavell was downright ill. After the end of the offensive by O'Connor, his focus was aimed primarily at the Balkan problems and the restless situation in Syria and Iraq, so he left Wilson to do it. From these, he had taken the view that the South of Benghazi were something very similar to the escarpment that Sollum drops Southeast, leaving a few passages. Now you had noticed that things were instead so very different. Furthermore, he was not missed a second important topographic detail: the defensive holds offered by brackish marshes West of el Agheila. If you have previously had an immediate reconnaissance, he thought bitterly, was immediately ordered to block passage. Employment of narrows at el-Mugtaa was annoying. Neame was considered almost unbeatable the distance of 500 km from Tobruk to replenish it advanced troops, while the enemy considered possible that you were feeding their own from Tripoli, which was even farther!

Even the structure of commands and units was unsatisfactory. Neame was not showing up to the expectations of Wavell, probably wont hurt from the successes of O'Connor. The 2nd Armored Division had lost its commander, Gen. J.C. Tilly, died suddenly on 5 January, just landed in Egypt. He was replaced by Gen. H.B. Latham until the arrival of Gen. M D. Gambier-Parry (February 12), who was ill adapted to a large unfinished unit and unknown. Remained with the Division were the *King's Dragoon Guards* with armored cars, the 3rd Armored Brigade (3rd Hussars with light tanks, 5th *Royal Tank Regiment* with *cruisers* and 6th *Royal Tank Regiment* with M 13/40 war prizes) and 2nd support group. The best was given by 52 *cruisers*, but half of them located in the workshop and half was destined to enter it in the short term for the wear of engines and treads ⁽⁵⁶⁾. The support group, then, consisted of a motorized battalion, a 25-Pounder artillery regiment, one anti-tank and machine-gun company.

The logistics sector, for its part, gave other reasons for concern. The action of X *Fliegerkorps* on Benghazi had been so violent that no more ship has entered the port. As a natural consequence all supplies should flow from Tobruk for ordinary way with a huge expenditure of means of transport, so that was clearly damaging to the 2nd Armored Division stocks massed South of Benghazi, with serious repercussions during the withdraw. For the organization of supplies, Wavell was based on promised 3,000 lorries monthly inflow from the United States. In fact, in the first quarter of 1941 they arrived less than half ⁽⁵⁷⁾, while in that same period 8,000 vehicles taken throughout the Middle East departed for Greece (and they were all lost). Certainly Wavell and Neame were embarrassed, but as was Graziani, who had desperately called for just a thousand trucks to continue on Marsa Matruh!

There was not much wonder Neame protested. The defense was largely tied in part to the possibility of maneuver of the 2nd Armored, mobile you couldn't hardly tell and where tanks would remain on the road in the primary distance traveled in the desert. Needed to "squeeze together", a true Armored Division, two infantry divisions - all of course fully complete - and an affordable air support. Wavell did not like.

"I found Neame pessimistic and nagging in the request of any kind of reinforcement that I had not - he was then writing -, his tactical arraignments were decidedly unfounded [*crazy*], he had put a brigade of the 9th Australian Division at Morshead in the middle of the plain between Agheila and Benghazi, with both flanks uncovered, immobilized due to lack of transportation, totally unnecessary and clear prey of a few tanks that had raided from el Agheila.

I ordered that he withdraw on the heights East of Benghazi, where there was a minimum of defensible positions (...). I told Neame that if his troops were forced to withdraw, he must not let draw from the direct defense of Benghazi, but put the armored brigade behind the left side of Australians, on the escarpment above Benghazi (...).

I was also scared to the size and the heaviness of the command of the 2nd Armored Division. Gambier-Parry, although he had only a Brigade to be used, had led to as a whole, with the idea to train him in the country (...).

I got worried and depressed back from that visit, but there was nothing I could do. Transfers for Greece were booming and I was nothing. But I had sad forebodings and my confidence was shaken in Neame" ⁽⁵⁸⁾.

Back in Cairo, on 19 March, Wavell sent detailed directives to Neame: an enemy counteroffensive was possible, however the preservation of British troops from a defeat and heavy losses was a lot more important than territorial dispute. Under no circumstances was lawful to risk catastrophic reverse for Benghazi. It was convenient to try to improve the defensive arrangement of el Agheila westward, arriving to the marshes of el-Mugtaa, but in any case the front had to be covered by light elements responsible for an offensive patrol and seeking to wear down the enemy without separate hook. Armored forces was preferable take toward Antelat, so as to be able to maneuver on the side or at the back of the opponent, as he exercised the main effort towards Benghazi or towards Tobruk, across the desert. If he had appeared too superior, the 2nd Armored Division had to fallback and keeping always maneuvering toward the enemy's exposed flank. In essence, a flexible policy allow good results.

After all even Rommel had major problems and for units and for repairs. It was to make it as expensive as possible these problems, hitting from the air his warehouses. Among other things, the provision of advanced German-Italian deposits could be regarded as probative evidence of offensive intentions.

The stresses of Wavell pushed Neame to get busy. Therefore, conscious of their fix and remembering the great value of deposits by Connor staggered camp during its advance, began to use the available means of transport to set up depots in Barce, Benghazi and el-Magrum.

Having clarified their intentions on behavior for them, Wavell reported to London that believed in preparation for an attack of limited proportions and it was very quiet. Good reasons for concern existed, indeed: on the 24th Gen. Streich had occupied el Agheila without much contrast. Churchill hastened to ask for clarification:

"We are of course concerned by a rapid German advance on Agheila. And they won't go ahead whenever they encounter resistance. I guess you're just waiting for the tortoise pulls out the head that enough for to be able to cut off.

It seems enormously important to give the Germans a first taste of our value. What is the condition and location of the 7th Armored Division? Please give me your opinion on the situation. I approve of whole

heartily about your request to General Smuts for a brigade of the 1st South African Division. We must do everything possible to accelerate the movement of the 2nd South African Division. Part of the 50th British Division on the 22nd (...).⁽⁵⁹⁾

Wavell, who had just returned to his command after a visit to the front of Keren, answered both illustrating the trend of events, both admitting that the only hope was that the German contingent in North Africa was still very limited:

“1. There is still no evidence that there are many Germans to Agheila; It is likely that a majority of Italians with a small German reinforcement.

2. I must admit that I assumed in Cyrenaica high risks after the occupation of Benghazi to give maximum help to Greece. At that time I felt that you could overlook the Italians who were in Tripolitania and it was unlikely that the Germans to risk to send to Africa large formations of armored troops, to the inefficiency of the Italian Navy. Provisions that remain in Cyrenaica only small armored forces and one Australian Division is not fully trained.

3. After that we assumed the responsibility of helping the Greece, began to accumulate evidence of the arrival of German reinforcements in Tripolitania, accompanied by attacks against Malta that we prevented that insistent bombardment of Tripoli, on which I had done assignment. German air attacks against Benghazi, which prevented the transpose of supplies to use the port, still increased our difficulty.

4. The result is that currently in Cyrenaica I am weak and I don't have any reservations that armored troops, absolutely essential. The 2nd Armored Division, one brigade in Cyrenaica, the other in Greece. The 7th Armored Division is returning [Cairo], and, given that there are no stock tanks, will have to wait for repairs, which require time. The next or the next two will be months of trepidation, but the enemy has problems extremely difficult and I'm sure his actual figures were greatly exaggerated. I cannot however afford at the moment to use my small armored forces so boldly as I would like.

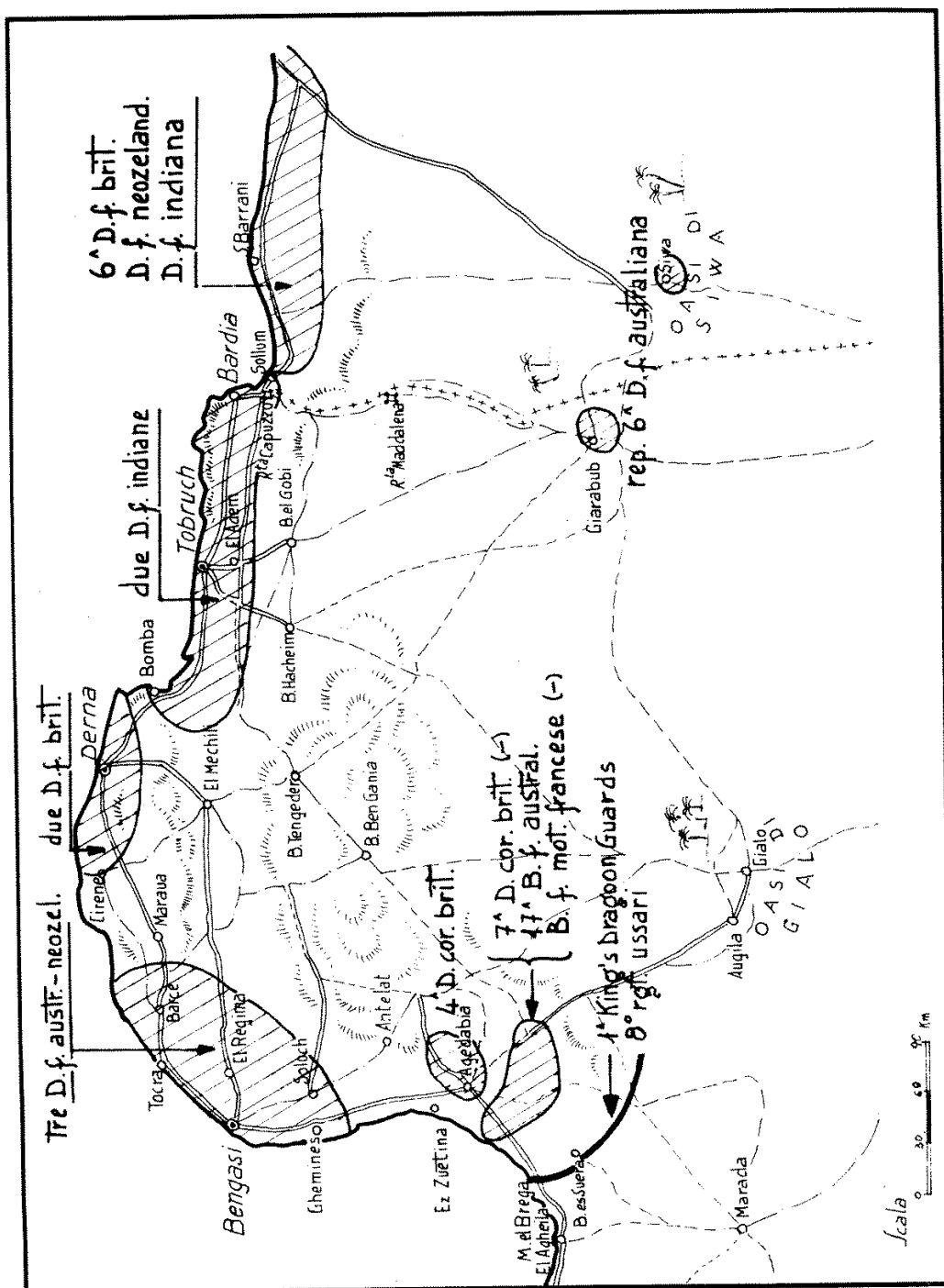
Measures are underway to strengthen Cyrenaica (...). My greatest difficulty lies in transport (, etc.).⁽⁶⁰⁾

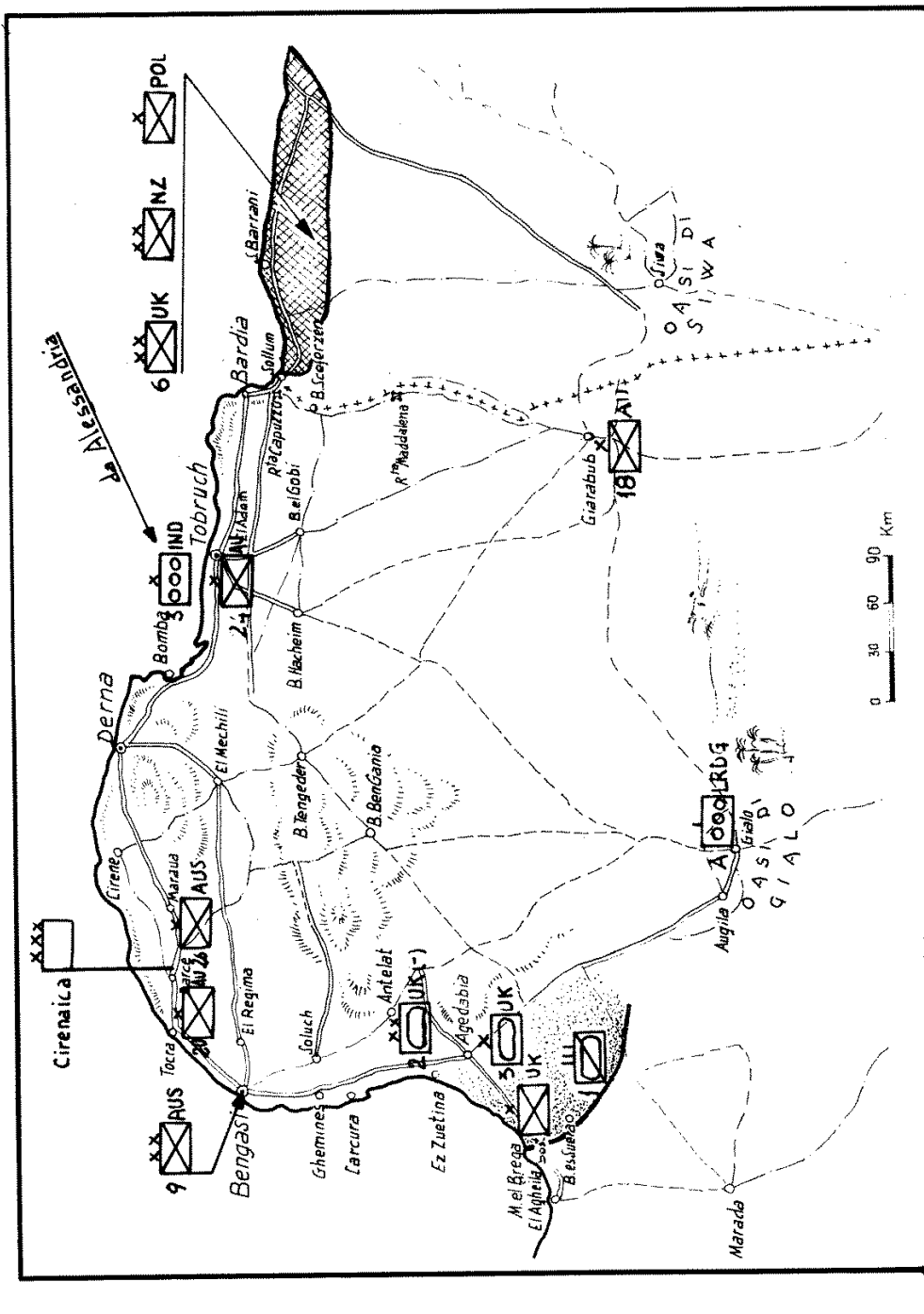
This is a clear and simple admission of errors of appreciation. It is not easy to make a comment. First of all, the source there was undoubtedly the political decision to intervene in Balcania, then a inevitably shortage of partly trained units (Australian and New Zealand divisions), possibly partly alleviation where was drawn to personal that was in Great Britain. But even in this respect there was a politico-military decision: first the defense of the United Kingdom (don't forget the fear

of invasion), then the Middle East and the rest. Moreover, as for armored troops, in Britain there were the 1st Arm. Div. in the course of reorganization after losing everything in France, the 6th Arm. Div. formed in late autumn 1940, the 8th and 9th Arm. Div. formed in December 1940. Nothing else. It is also possible that Churchill not had every wronged wishing unit miss training with the tens of thousands of men in Egypt and not used with XIII Corps, however probably the primary error consisted in too long transformation of 1st Cavalry Division in Palestine: it became the 10th Armored Division only in the summer of 1942 (August 10). It is also true that from 12 May to 15 July was sent with mechanized elements already in Jordan, Iraq and Syria, but a quicker reorganization and use in Cyrenaica had inconclusive results. Deserves emphasis, among other things, the decision to remove the 3rd Armored Brigade to hazard of a confrontation with a stronger enemy. He said the situation Graziani found in December-February was about the Babini Brigade. Only Wavell did not hesitate to take a stance, where Graziani and Tellera as always remained hesitant, until the unfortunate use at Beda Fomm.

The British dispositions was now as follows. On 26 March the 2nd Armored Division had taken over responsibility for Defense on Marsa el-Brega. Until the gravitation of the enemy effort was not clear, the result frankly the 3rd armored brigade had to stay in a central location, between the via Balbia and desert roads at Mechili and alleging the Gulf of Bomba. The 9th Australian (Gen. Leslie Morshead), given that there were no positions that allow effective static defense South of Benghazi, settled with the 20th and 26th brigades ⁽⁶¹⁾ little alignment in the vicinity of Tocra-Scheme. The Third Brigade, the 24th was still in Tobruk waiting to be transferred to Benghazi. There was no other but at Neame was assigned the 3rd Indian motorized brigade, three cavalry regiments, which had come on the 29th el-Adem, and squadron A of the *Long Range Desert Group*, which was tasked to observe enemies Gialo movements from oasis of Marada (sketch No. 7 and 8).

The 30th Wavell telegraphed to Neame. The information, probably exaggerated, they spoke of a colonial armored Division ⁽⁶²⁾ or part of a German Armored Division; of *Ariete*, probably of the *Trento*, surely the *Pavia*, *Bologna*, *Brescia* and *Savona*. Calculating the need to amass supplies for thirty days, the enemy could move on April 16 with the colonial Division





and one Armored Division, the May 14 could add another German colonial Division and on May 24 the *Ariete* or another auto-transportable division.

Sure was that Rommel, if he just had glimpsed some probability of success against the British formations, he would not let the opportunity. *"But I don't think-* added Wavell- *that he is able to make a great effort for a month yet (...). Your job for the next two months is to keep the enemy in the 150 miles between Agheila and Benghazi, without heavy losses for your armored and motorized troops"*. That, he explained, and Benghazi itself had no tactical value, except to allow the opponent moving forward of the airbases. *"You should concede ground rather than run the risk of a rout, but less given up the better"* ⁽⁶³⁾. In essence, assuming-timelessly unlikely-a deep offensive in the next three to four weeks, Neame was to fall back slowly on *gebel* and resist as long as possible. Neame, which just sent out a statement that day in which observed does not exist any evidence of an imminent attack, on the 31st to the 14th to the Commander in Chief replied:

"The task is absolutely clear to me (...). The enemy began this morning to advance from Agheila, apparently only along the coastal road (...)".

3. THE EVENTS OF THE END OF MARCH 1941

The third week of March, which was to close with the start of a brilliant counter-offensive in Northern Africa, provided, however, a series of negative pages: the fall of the last major Libyan oases in Italian hands, that of Giarabub (21 March); the fall of Keren in Eritrea (27 March); the failure of the counter-offensive in val Deshnices, in Albania; the pro-British coup in Yugoslavia (27 March) and the naval battles of Gaudo and Matapan (March 28-29).

Actions for the possession of the great Libyan desert oasis provide limited relief events itself, but strategically important, as tending to ensure full availability of internal operational Director, essential for the realization

the armored forces maneuver against the side and the reverse side of the bulk of the forces deployed along the coast, straddling the via Balbia, necessarily uniform pattern, whether addressed to the East or West: the northern wing resting on the sea and the southern one more or less stretched out toward the desert and exposed to the enemy turning.

In the middle of the section, East of the Libyan desert, between the meridians of Tobruk and Barce, 900 kilometers from the coast, the oasis of Kufra a principal, Kufra, and by three minor locations, respectively, at 120 miles West (Rebiana), 120 and 200 km northwest (Bzema and Tazerbo) in the air line. The population of different lineages (Tebù, Tuaregh, Berber-Arab, Cyrenaican), did not reach the overall 6,000 souls. The core of Kufra is in the Kufra basin, in el-Hauwari depression. The Kufra basin is a basin roughly elliptical in shape, with the major axis of about 50 kilometers, with direction from northeast to Southwest, and less than twenty. On the northern rim, at an altitude of about 400 meters, lies the village of et-Tags where, in January 1931, was built a redoubt. To the North lies the depression and the oasis of el-Hauwari, about 12 kilometers long, with the homonymous town (a thousand inhabitants). The oasis of Rebiana (500 inhabitants) is a 20 km long and a salty deep divides it from a chain of elevations; at the northern end are the village and the *zavia* 1. The oasis of Bzema (80 inhabitants) develops in a semicircle around a salt lake 18 km long, at the foot of a rocky cord. The oases of Tazerbo (just over 500 inhabitants), finally, 25-30 kilometers long and 10 meters wide, is crossed in the middle by a dip with salt lakes and salt plain (sketch No. 9).

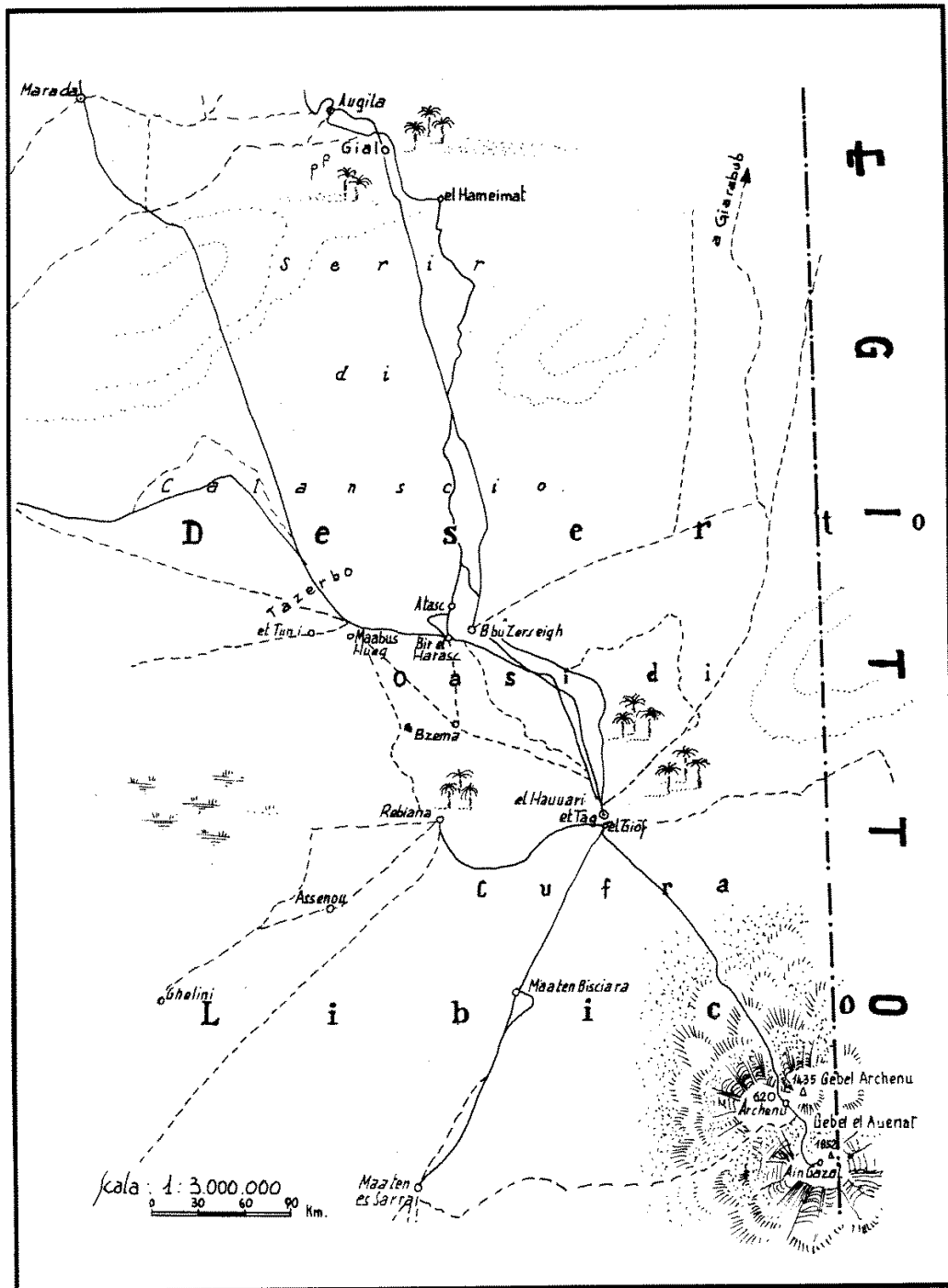
At 250-300 kilometers southeast of Kufra, Libyan-Egyptian border, raising the massive plateau of Archenu (1435 m) and Auenat (1934 m). Through the Libyan desert, there were no real caravan. After the Italian occupation, in order to make easier the communication through the immense Africa Saharan, the major routes were marked with piling: Gialo-Kufra-Tazerbo, Marada, Kufra-Tazerbo, Kufra – Kufra-Giarabub, el Auenat, Kufra-Maaten es Sarra, Kufra-Rebiana. The path followed the terrain more accessible for both caravans and conveniently equipped vehicles.

The Kufra garrison, under the command of a captain, was the 59th and 60th heavy machine-gun company, a Saharan company

The oasis of Kufra

L'OASI DI CUFRA

Schizzo n. 9



and a Saharan 20 mm battery, for a total of 367 men. Against the location first army reconnaissance had been accomplished on January 31 by a large *Long Range Desert Group* patrol. The immediate reaction of a platoon in Saharan exploration had led to disperse the English unit and to capture the commander - major. P.A. Clayton- with documents from which was learned that a large French de Gaullist column was preparing to attack the oasis.

Since July 3, 1940 Governor of Chad had contacted the Gaullist movement, who, aiming to collect under the flag of Free France colonies of French Equatorial Africa, sent overseas at the end of August Col. Leclerc ⁽⁶⁴⁾. These summary managed in order: the 26th Chad formally joined the fight against the axis, the 27th Cameroon, the 28th Congo and Ubangui Chari, the 29th Gabon, while Gen. de Larminat, former Chief of staff of the command-in-Chief of the Levant, assumed the post of Governor-General of free French Africa. However the force available to Leclerc, on 2 December stood at the head of the troops in Chad, was very limited. There was the Senegalese *tirailleurs* Regiment of Chad (little more than 6,000 men), but was divided into five distinct locations, in relation to insuppressible territorial needs the regimental Command with three companies and a depot company in Fort Lamy ⁽⁶⁵⁾; four groups, battalion-level but varied entity respectively at Fort Archambault, Abeche, Largeau and Mao. From this composite Leclerc drew fewer than 500 men to conduct operations in the Sahara.

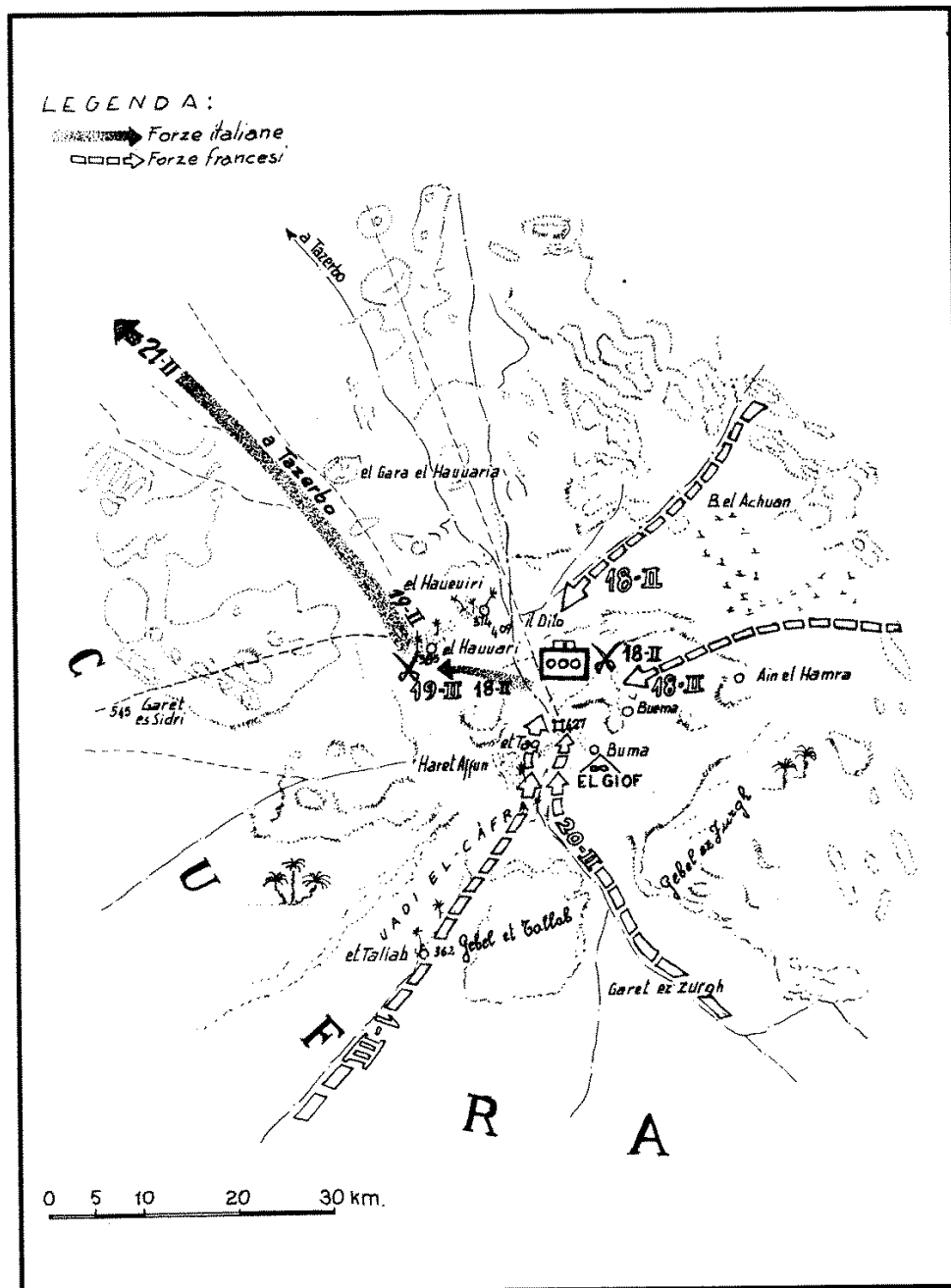
The first company-led by a of group 25 camel-borne *tirailleurs* and 20 guides-had been armed reconnaissance on Tegerhi (13 January), the southernmost police station of the desert, in connection with the raid organized by the *Long Range Desert Group* on Murzuk (11 January). This initiative had been successful but had placed across the need to use motorized troops. For Leclerc was a simple move of taste and experience. Even the British attempt on Kufra of 31 January they then dismounted. While elements of the *Long Range Desert Group* back in Egypt, he decided to carry out a thorough reconnaissance. A truck-transportable company of 90 men, of whom two-thirds national, guided by a car of the L.R.D.G. and conducted personally by him, departed on the morning of February 5 from Tekrø reaching the oasis of el-Zurgh, seven

kilometers from the fort of Kufra, at dusk of the 7th. Reassured by the lack of signs of a possible identification form part of the Italians ⁽⁶⁶⁾, Leclerc arraigned to acquire elements with three dismounted patrols. At 19:30 these left the oasis and before 02:00 of 8 February were back: the airport seemed guarded and, according to the head of the indigenous village of el-Giof, at night the garrison remained closed within the fort of et-Tag. In such circumstances, Leclerc resolved to take advantage of the latest hours of darkness to make a raid on the airport and cause as much damage as possible. The action should be carried out by a tactical group accompanied by Leclerc and supported, where appropriate, by a second group. However, on target and torched two *ghibili*., the Italian fire reaction and the launch of a green rocket as a general alarm, were misinterpreted by the reserve, who rushed forward to bright lights in aid of the first. Leclerc, who had not noticed the rocket, believed his position by now compromised by resounding unforeseeable intervention and thought necessary to withdraw. The withdrawal, carried out in broad daylight, was hampered by a few slow Italian aircraft, but the column reached Maaten es-Sarra with slight losses.

Particularly urged by the successes of the offensive by O'Connor, Leclerc took in hand the project against Kufra. Wanting to have motorized forces, is regulated by the availability of vehicles and fuel. On 16 February, the column was picked up at Maaten es-Sarra: 100 Europeans 300 natives with 26 submachine guns, 4 machine guns, two 37 mm. pieces, four 81 mm. mortars and a 75 mm gun. Had come, trusted information, according to which the Italians would be directed to evacuate Kufra. Leclerc, which aimed to combat success, was pushed to speed up the time and to send a truck transportable company to prevent the ventilated (ventilato) abandonment of the oasis. The rest of the infantry and the artillery followed him at a short distance. The movement was soon spotted by Italian aerial reconnaissance right from the start and on the 18th the two groups were identified either at *gebel* el-Buebn and the other in the *gebel* et-Turgh. Heedless of being discovered, Leclerc decided to turn Fort et-Tag from East to attack behind the Saharan company, the most dangerous mobile element of the garrison and eliminate before investing the redoubt (sketch No. 10).

This unit ⁽⁶⁷⁾, located astride the Buema et Tag track as soon as it received the first reports took position

The battle of 18-20 February 1941 at Kufra

I COMBATTIMENTI DEL 18-20 FEBBRAIO 1941 A CUFRA *Schizzo n. 10*

six kilometers north of the redoubt, ready to counter maneuver outside of the oasis. At 12:30 French avant-garde suddenly saw at just over a kilometer from the Saharan column hidden in a fold of the land. The attack was not successful; After an hour and a half of fighting for the Italians, Leclerc temporarily disengaged and dispose a second attempt with a larger turning on the right. This time the maneuver succeeded. The Saharan column, escaping an assault on three sides, had initially tried to fall back toward the Fort in order not to be cut off, but soon become aware of the disadvantage of losing the freedom of maneuver and unbound, took over the rock of el-Hauwari, where stayed to tidy up. Leclerc, on the other hand, improved encirclement from the North: an part of the avant-garde to the northeast of et-Tag and the other Southeast of el-Hauwari.

At dawn the following day, 19 February, a *ghibli* aircraft and a Sm.81, sent by the Libyan Sahara, appeared in the sky of Kufra and strafed from low altitudes, the Eastern French detachment, though without much success. Shortly after the column attacked the Western Saharan to break the semicircle around the redoubt. The clash was lively, but after a couple of hours the Saharan column, in lack of heavy weapons and short of ammunition, resolved to break contact and withdraw towards Tazerbo. Meanwhile, from the South had arrived the rest of the French forces and el-Giof had been occupied.

Leclerc was prepared for a long siege: pushed some security patrols 25-39 kilometers on the main access routes to the oasis to intercept the possible arrival of Italian units; established an air link, albeit uneven, with Tekrø; put in place an intermittent but continuous cannonade against the Fort; appeasing the natives.

From the other side the garrison initially reacted vigorously with fire and with the preparation of outworks which can best beat on the more dangerous approach streets besieging. Unfortunately overestimate the strength of the enemy and the mood probably suffered from the rout of the tenth army. On February 28 the Commander informed:

“Enemy continues bombing reduced with howitzers, external defense with bullets & mortars at this time, bombing attack by three enemy planes. Our situation worsens every hour, Insure send aircraft tomorrow morning. & upcoming land reinforcements to lift very depressed colonial troop’s morale”.

The picture was exaggerated and bombing aircraft were *Lysander* and an old *Potez*. At 16:00 on the same day, an Italian lawmaker tried to get shelter for the wounded of both sides. Faced with the refusal of France, stemming from the perception of a moral defense not much balance, and the cannonade resumed March 10, at dawn, the guard capitulating after destroying the radio station. The losses were minor, very minor: 3 dead and 4 Libyans, wounded. In the redoubt were 11 officers, 15 non-commissioned officers and troops between national and about 260 Libyans. Of the latter, 19, divided into two groups and with the help of local guides provided by camels, managed to reach the 25 March Ajdabiya. All in all, it was not a brilliant episode. The Fort had a well-organized defensive system, in conditions to resist for a long time, and the texture of the garrison was not less than that of the attacker. Unfortunately the conduct of defense, except for the Saharan column that then fled to Tazerbo, was absolutely passive.

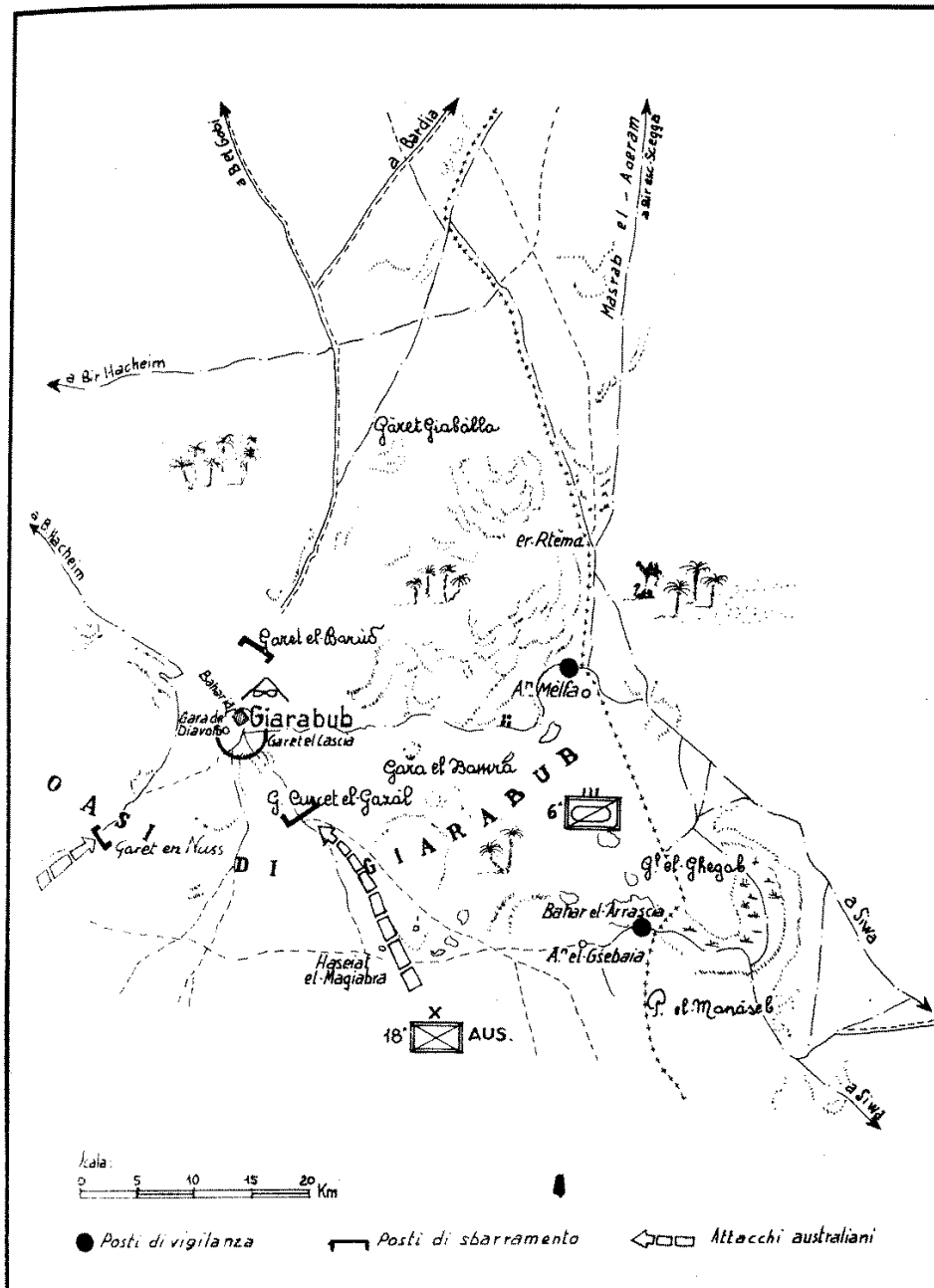
For Giarabub was somewhat different story. The oasis, located about 250 kilometers from the coast, nestles in a basin which is the part of great depressions, hugging area the oasis of Marada, Augila, Gialo, Giarabub and Siwa (sketch No. 11). The 25-kilometer-long reservoir in Meridian direction and 6 km wide, spread of marshes and swamps and is crossed by a Rocky Ridge composed of Garet el-Barud and Garet el-Cuscia. Its bottom is six feet below sea level and descends at some point to 14 meters. The oasis is thirty kilometers from the Egyptian border.

Is the cradle of the confraternity of the Senussi and is rich in wells, gardens and palm trees. The buildings, with the mosque that has buried the founder of the sect, go back to the second half of the last century and are collected on a hill overlooking the oasis: tied to one another by a dry wall, about four meters, without Windows and with only three major places of access, the buildings together constitute a kind of large fortified complex. The surrounding terrain shows a succession of summits and hollows: modest rounded hills called *races* and small swampy hollows called *milk*. Thirty kilometers further East, in the area of Melfa, meet two salted lakes, powered by undercurrents and invisible humid nights of rainfall in Africa. The oasis was important from a defensive point of view because it blocked the car and caravan

The oasis of Giarabub

L'OASI DI GIARABUB

Schizzo n. 11



route Giarabub-Gialo-el Agheila, where motorized forces could contribute to an enemy attack along the coast, threatening to turn our defensive line. On the other hand the possession of Giarabub could offer a basis for an offense towards the oasis of Siwa, useful in turn as a foothold to threaten of bypass the great British entrenched camp of Marsa Matruh. The employment of Siwa would also have had a complementary logistics value to solve the drinking water problem for Giarabub.

In December 1940, after which the small frontier garrisons Cesc-Sceferzen, Maddalena, redoubts el-Uescechet, el-Gam Heira el Grein) were forced to fall back on Giarabub, which greatly strengthened garrison, in February was composed of:

- four border guard companies,
- five Libyan companies,
- one company 47/32 guns with 14 pieces,
- a Libyan engineers platoon,
- one battery of 77/28 with four pieces,
- one battery of 20 mm. pieces with sixteen gunners,
- a engineer nucleus liaison,
- a field hospital,
- a subsistence allowance section.

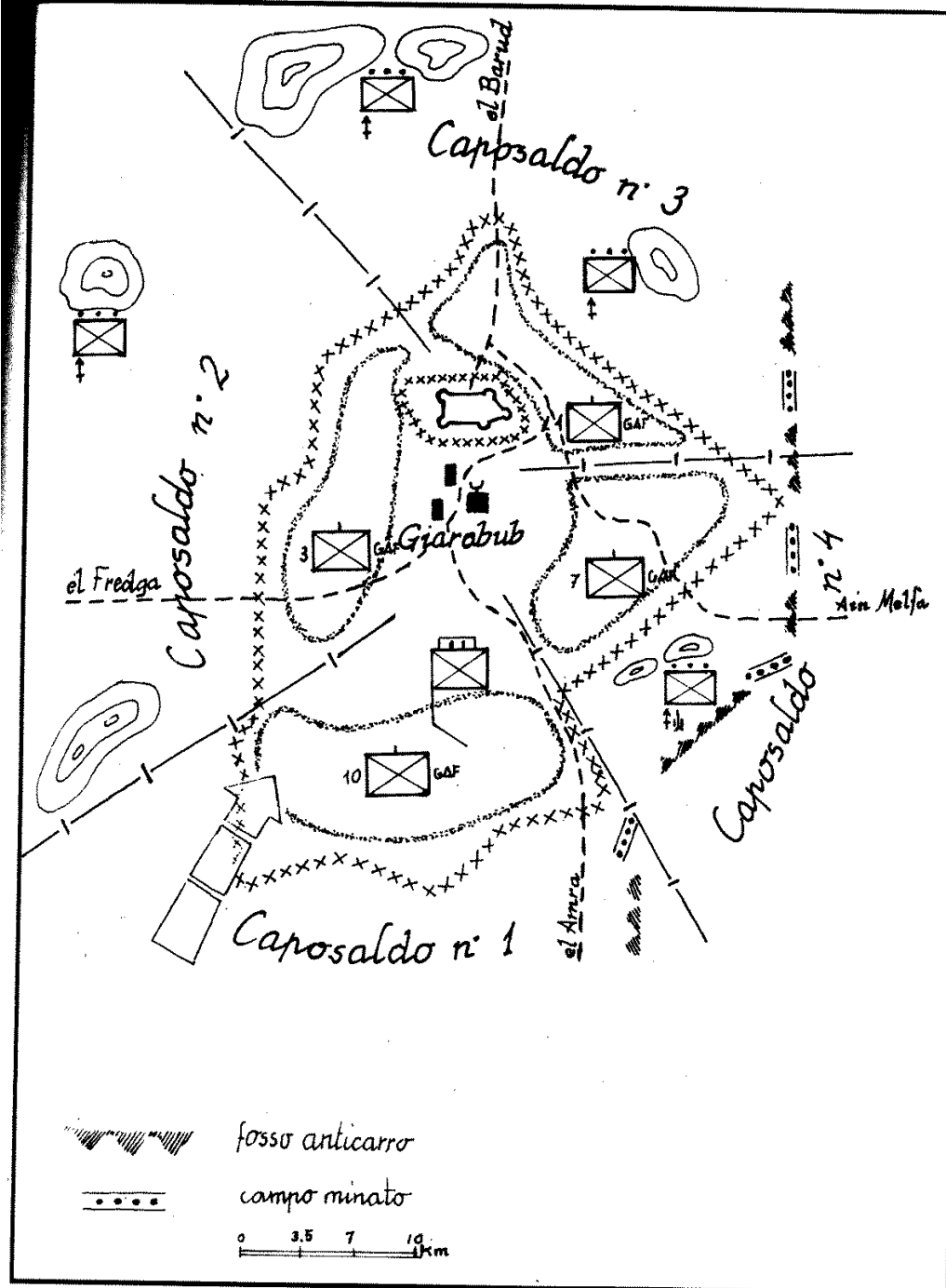
In total it was 1,350 national and 750 Libyans, under the command of Maj. Salvatore Castagna. The defensive organization was based on four cornerstones of the company, each with 47 guns and 20 mm. auto-cannon. The entire perimeter (four kilometers of development) was protected by a band of netting and stretches of minefield and anti-tank ditch. Ahead in position of strength a crown of supervisory posts and posts of the barrier. About four kilometers north of the Fort of Giarabub there was a landing field (sketch No. 12.).

From the outset the garrison had been invested by cavalry regiments of the 6th Australian Division. It does not appear that initially existed by the English intended to launch an attack decided to eliminate the Italian garrison. Obvious reasons of opportunity, given the religious character of the oasis, advised caution. However it must be said that isolation made - also thanks to the lucky offensive performance O'Connor - had been effective. On February 4 was the last flight of the aircraft for the supply of the garrison. In addition, the eviction of Cyrenaica had caused serious phenomena of defection

The defensive organization of the oasis of Giarabub in mid-March 1941

L'ORGANIZZAZIONE DIFENSIVA DI GIARABUB A META' MARZO 1941

Schizzo n. 12



in the ranks of the Libyans, worried about the fate of their families.

To prevent them leaving with their arms, the Commander was authorized to dismiss them, though in some sixty had asked to stay and continued to fight with the national. With the removal of the Libyan garrison strength had fallen to about 1,300 men.

On the other hand had increased the level of stocks of food (the daily ration was halved for two months). On 8 February Graziani authorized the newly promoted. Lt. Col. Castagna to do as he believed: it was an implied confession of impotence.

On 19 February, after intense artillery preparation, was attacked the post of Garet el Cuscet-Gazal; eventually overrunning the defenders, were forced to take on ditch not accessible to armored cars. The enemy continued then to Giarabub, until, counterattacked by a mobile column was in turn forced to vacate the camp. From that day the Australian assumed an increasingly close action. The 25th Castagna said: *"Food Supply promised have not yet arrived. I have only one day of food. Is painful, after so many sacrifices, having to surrender to hunger"*. Two days later, finally, was made a air supply drop of hardtack and tins. Yet on 2 March was dismissed a call to surrender, as was an earlier solicitation in January ⁽⁶⁸⁾. The 6 a new attack in lieu of barrier of Garet el Cuscet-Gazal, forced the defenders to withdraw under the protection of mobile column posted on the reverse of the position. The penetration was eventually arrested with the assistance of other mobile units, contributed by Giarabub. The enemy decided to resolve the situation with increased use of forces and made the 18th Australian Brigade. The attacks resumed, in multiple directions. More vigorous than the 16 and 17, after which he was unable to retain possession of the barrier of Garet el Cuscet-Gazal and Garet en-Nuss. On same day the 17th, Giarabub received another supply plane. At the same time was also launched a message to Rommel: *"Greeting the brave defenders of Giarabub and I express my admiration. Continue to do your duty. Among the few weeks we'll be to you"*.

Rommel was strongly interested in the strength of that outpost. He had already warned Gen. Aimone-Cat:

"In view of a future offensive is of great importance to maintain possession of Giarabub. The team must then continue aerial supply of the garrison. The *Deutsches Afrikakorps* will later contact with Giarabub terrestrially".

His thoughts were expressed in detail by Lt. Col. von dem Home, Chief of Staff of the DAK, in a letter sent to the Comando Superiore during Rommel's trip to Berlin. In connection with the planned counteroffensive and especially for the security of the right flank, had been examined the employment issue of Gialo, resulting in release of Giarabub and recapture of Kufra. For this purpose sufficient forces were just numerous but good efficiency and motorized, where DAK being prepared to compete. The operation was scheduled-in principle-for the month of April. The Comando Superiore would, for each of the two objectives, to provide a couple of reinforced battalions, preferably motorized. They would have been given the task, by the employment of intermediate oasis to insure with the rear of the attack during the counter-offensive, and undertake the accommodation of local landing fields. Of course the requisite battalions should possibly be taken from divisions intended for the counteroffensive (*Trento, Pavia, Aries* and also *Bologna, Savona* and *Brescia*). According to Rommel could however be used the garrisons of Tagridet, Bu Gnam, Bani Walid and Mizda, whose responsibilities, with the move of the deployment towards the East, and especially with the possession of Gialo and Kufra, would have lost importance.

But there was more time. In the evening, ...of the 19 units of the 18th Australian Brigade attacked strongpoint No. 1 from the Southwest. Able to penetrate but it was pressed back after bitter fighting. The next day the Australian artillery, which had the advantage of greater range, raged unabated on strongpoint. After a violent bombing the enemy penetrated into the strongpoint No. 1 and the fight stretched to strongpoints n. 2 and 4. At 09:30 nearly all dominant heights of strongpoint No. 1 were in enemy hands. The counterassault launched clearly showed unnecessary. The Lt. Col. Castagna was injured while fighting at the head of a group of Libyans. The position fell at 14:00. The fighting continued for about four hours in other strongholds, but it was now no more organized resistance.

So had complete the defense of Giarabub. The total number of casualties, according to the assessment of the Commander, exceeded the 400 killed and wounded. Seven of the dead were officers. The Australians had lost 17 dead and 77 wounded.

In East Africa the campaign was reaching its decisive stage. On 26 March, a month after the evacuation of Mogadishu,

the British occupied Harar; the next day, after 55 days of struggle, ended the battle of Keren, crucial for the fate of Eritrea. Asmara and Addis Ababa were abandoned and declared open city that were not involved in the destruction of the war. The April 8 will cease the resistance of Massawa. With the loss of Eritrea, Somalia, of Hararino and of Shewa there was more unity in defense of the Empire. Residual forces resist in individual concession of Dessie-Amba Alagi and Gondarino. Territories of Galla and Sidamo, abandoned the border troops withdrew on the plateau.

In Albania the long-awaited offensive in val Deshnices, started on March 9 from IV Corps (Gen. Camillo Mercalli) and the VIII (Gen. Gastone Gambara), had failed. Mussolini, that the enthusiasm of Gambara and the endorsement of Cavallero had convinced of the certain success of the enterprise, at 20:00 that evening had held report to the key commanders involved, trying to lessen the disappointment and urging renewed offensive, since the beginning of April the Germans were given the go-ahead to the operation Manrita against Greece, then, the next day, being shared for Rome. Was quivering in two external theatres closer to motherland expected entry into Allied action to resolve the situation better or worse; in the farthest, where the allies could not go, things seemed hopelessly compromised. How much desired results "parallel war" there was no right to be satisfied! Furthermore the coup of March 27 in Yugoslavia by the Gen. Jelena Simovic, two days after joining the Government in Belgrade to Tripanito, seemed to affect the German program.

Also from the sea came the sad news. In Merano, during the Italian-German meeting of 13-14 February, Adm. Raeder had suggested offensive show by Italian fast battleships against British traffic in the Mediterranean. The topic had been touched, even in private conversations, demonstrating the strong interest of the *Kriegsmarine* for such action. On 16 March the Adm. Rircardi communicated to Adm. Jachino, Commander in Chief of the fleet, specially convened in Rome, that following the implementation of operation *Lustre* (transportation of the British expeditionary force to Greece), Raeder, through his representative in Rome, Adm. Weichold, had exerted new pressures for

an Italian initiative. So he had come to the determination to prepare an operation in the Eastern Mediterranean, despite the very serious situation in stocks of naphtha (the Germany had not yet begun the supplies by rail) ⁽⁶⁹⁾.

The project involved a double episode offensive-north of Crete, the Aegean, and South of the big island to the island of Gavdos-for raking those waters where the German air navigation reported daily for British convoys. More or less at the same time had to be carried out a assault means (commando) raid against the Souda Bay naval base, much exploited by the opponent.

As concerned the operation--scheduled for March 24 or 25--should be covered by very strict secrecy. It was decided to employ a single battleship, the *Vittorio Veneto*, with the 1st Naval Division (Adm. Carlo Cattaneo), the 3rd Division (Adm. Luigi Sansonetti) and the 8th Division (Adm. Antonio Legnani), but, in order to safeguard security, Jachino renounced to convene in Naples the commanders of the divisions, merely to call for the 24th Adm. Cattaneo, which was entrusted with the episode North of Crete. The *Vittorio Veneto* left La Spezia the evening of the 22nd arriving in Naples on the morning of 23rd. The break lasted until the evening of the 26th: the delay of a few days was due to the need of direct agreements with officers of the X *Fliegerkorps* and how naval cooperation and links between planes and ships ⁽⁷⁰⁾. Ally contest was particularly important because of the large autonomy of the German fighter. On 25 March two Luftwaffe officers, arrived from Taormina, boarded the *Vittorio Veneto*: it was the first time that German aviation and the R. Marina operated together, so everything had to improvise. In the night of the 26th a special courier from Rome brought the agreements between the R. Aeronautica and the R. Marina, agreements that provided for the *non* use of fighters embarked, i.e. aircraft most pressed the team to repel attacks by bombers and torpedo bombers of the British. *In extremis*, remarked of Jachino, was promised the CR. 42 intervention based in Rhodes.

At 21:00 of the 26th the *Vittorio Veneto* departed from the port of Naples with the 10th destroyer Squadron. At the same time departed from Taranto the 1st Division and from Brindisi the 8th. The 3rd Division had to sail the 27th 5.30 from Messina. Jachino was convinced that of the three British battleships in the base of Alexandria, two were severely damaged from He 111 attacks days before; that

would have had the necessary aerial cooperation, particularly to the East of Gaudo. at least until the morning of the 27th, when all Naples would have noticed that the *Vittorio Veneto* had left the moorings, the secret of the operation would be assured.

-Not one of these three was a valid assumptions and consequences weighed both Gaudo (morning and afternoon of the 28th) and Matapan (night on 29th) ⁽⁷¹⁾.

The information of the two British battleships damaged was not correct; it was stated in the afternoon of the 26th X *Fliegerkorps* itself but for reasons not clarified the news came to the team, still in Naples. Air navigation was completely inadequate for the purpose, and does not match the intended reconnaissance program and the air protection so that insufficient collaboration was made without any news about the presence at sea, the bulk of the Mediterranean Fleet: an aircraft carrier, three battleships, four cruisers and nine destroyers and was unable to defend ships from Swordfish and by British bombers.

The third assumption is invalid has the fictional. Until a few years ago the issue of secrecy of the Italian naval movements was discussed up even to support, by any side, the existence of enemy informants within the Supermarina. The morning of the 27th Adm. Cunningham, in Alexandria, knowing the Italian Fleet was slowly emerged and had received authoritative confirmation through various publications. Cunningham in the report sent to the Admiralty the November 11, 1941 ⁽⁷²⁾ reported: "*He had already decided to sail the battle fleet on the evening of the 27th (...), where the aerial reconnaissance of Malta signaled the presence of enemy cruisers sailed eastward on the afternoon of the 22nd (...) and in his memoirs* ⁽⁷³⁾", in 1950, he supported the view that the decision was subsequent to a careful assessment of possibility and discovery of the 3rd Naval division (12.30 hours of the 27th) from Sunderland's in part posted in reconnaissance. From unofficial source was written in 1956 that: "*... the news [of the sighting of the Trieste Naval Division] confirmed/Admiral in his intention to break with the fleet that night under the protection of darkness*" ⁽⁷⁴⁾. More explicit American information in 1959: «*Warned by Intelligence Service operating in Italy, Admiral Cunningham took the necessary measures to counter the Italian incursion*» ⁽⁷⁵⁾.

Finally, in 1974, when the official ban fell any hint to interception and decryption by *Ultra*, you knew the truth:

"They [Italians] had planned a major operation against British convoys in an area where they believed less likely to bump into enemy warships. Was a fortune for us that details of the operation were provided to the Luftwaffe that was supposed to provide air protection for the Italian ships; This revealed the full operation and we were able to pass it on time to Admiral Cunningham the story of how Admiral Cunningham ordered his ships to increase the pressure and then went ashore with his golf clubs, only to return to aboard unseen to take the sea with his ships at dusk is well-known; He also takes care to safeguard the *Ultra* source and, despite the threat of the sky by the Luftwaffe, he sent at the appropriate time a seaplane which became concerned only to fly close enough to the Italian fleet to be locate (...)" ⁽⁷⁶⁾.

The operation Gaudio, in addition to causing loss of three cruisers and two destroyers, brutally evident the status of inferiority of the Italian fleet in night combat technique, aero-naval cooperation and means of sighting of enemy (radar). Mussolini decided that the naval forces do not go beyond the range of land based fighters.

Thus ended the month of March 1941.

NOTES TO THE FIRST CHAPTER

- (1) FRIEDRICH WILHELM VON MELLENTIN, *Panzer Battles*, Future Publications Ltd, London, 1977, p. 56.
 - (2) The German officials who showed, in fact, deficiencies of initiative or character came pitilessly released by Rommel. To tell the truth they were also repatriates those also who "nourished preconceptions "that were not in agreement with him.
 - (3) ERWIN ROMMEL, *Guerra senza odio*, Garzanti, Milan 1959, 3rd ed, p. 206-207.
 - (4) ANGELO JACHINO, *Tramonto di una grande marina*, Mondadori, Milan 1960, 2nd ed, p. 251-257 and 320-332, and *Gaudo e Matapan*, Mondadori, Milan 1963, 3rd ed, p. 293-298.
 - (5) See in purpose, MARIO MONTANARI, *L'esercito italiano alla vigilia della 2ª guerra mondiale*, Historical Office of the Army General Staff (USE), Rome 1982, p. 93 and seg.
 - (6) Wavell in his report indicated altogether 500 dead, 1,373 wounded and 55 missing.
 - (7) Speech to the hierarchies of the fascism made on 23.2.1941 at the Adrian theatre in Rome.
 - (8) Memorandum 018296/408 dated 8.2.1941 of the R. Army General Staff.
 - (9) It is interesting to read the report compiled in 1937 by Col. Leo Geyr von Schweppenburg, the German military attaché to London, which, given the good existing relationships then between Great Britain and Germany, he had been able to carry out travels in Egypt and Palestine. "*The defense of Egypt for attacks coming from the west - he had written is favored by the natural characteristics of the Libyan Desert. On that land motorized troops and to a few axes of movement can act only limitedly: the Italians could therefore employ only consisting of a few forces. And that represents, to the fine soldiers, a factor of equal importance to the possibility that it would have the defense support of the strong natural obstacle of the Nile (...).*"
- The defense requires a right flank security; that is the domain of the Eastern Mediterranean. And it is likely that British naval forces succeed in carrying out a similar task in those waters. Without considering that the routes that should follow the Italian steamships to transport supplies to Africa are controlled by the British (...).Every attack from the West would be arrested at the latest at the Nile!»
- (LEO GEYR VON SCHWEPPENBURG, *Erinnerungen eines Militärrattachés*, Stuttgart 1949, p. 154-155).
- (10) ENNO VON RINTELEN, *Mussolini l'alleato*, Corso, Roma 1952, pp. 107-108.
 - (11) See in purpose MARIO MONTANARI, *the war in North Africa*, 1- Sidi el Barrani, USE, Rome 1990, p. 251-254 and 284-285.
 - (12) It should be however noted that Roatta, who was to take over in charge of Graziani's Chief of staff of the R. Army, traveled to Libya as a representative of the Comando Supremo.
 - (13) *Diario Storico Comando Supremo (DSCS)*, tele 3/1 date 13.2.1941 of the Armed forces high command signed by Roatta.
 - (14) The Comando Superiore had absorbed of fact the Command 5th Army Formally the executive provision became on date 16 February. The 5th Army Command will be reconstituted on 15 April.

- (15) Historical Diary Comando Superiore Armed Forces North Africa (DSCSAS), f.01/1677 given 13.2.1941 of the Comando Superiore.
- (16) DSCSAS, tel. 01/1725 dated 14.2.1941 of the Comando Superiore.
- (17) Also the boarding at Naples had happened of day and night, at the illuminated port. But strange difference in the loading of the steamboats puts to account indicate. While the German units were boarded complete of men and materials on the same ships, those Italians in departure - essentially companies of 47/32 and 65/17 batteries - being broken up into an inexplicable dilution many days: with a first convoy the guns, the ammunitions and the fuels; with a second the halftracks; with a party all the materials; with a fourth the staff. Naturally the "recovery" - of crews, means and materials to Tripoli it was most laborious, given the organizational deficiencies of the port, damaged and blocked by wreckage, and the service of the stages, let alone, for the precision, dysfunctions more high level. He happened also that they disembarked units does not signal in arrival not attended by any.
- On the organization of the convoys for the transport of the *Afrikakorps* see. memorandum of Supermarina reprinted by ALDO COCCHIA, *La guerra nel Mediterraneo, La difesa del traffico con l'Africa Settentrionale, vol. IV. Dal 10 giugno 1940 al 30 settembre 1941*, Ufficio Storico della Marina (USM), Roma 1958, p. 71-72..
- (18) It was be a matter of a hundred of men under the orders of the Mag. Santamaria: a machine-gun platoon, a rifle platoon, one 20 millimeter section, one platoon light tanks and one battery of four 77/28 guns transportable only on trucks. Being a person of good will and much initiative, Santamaria organized a series of fast recons more in order to improve his own availabilities of provisions, arms and ammunitions reaching to material abandoned by the rest of the 10th Army, than in order to hold to await the English. In fact he reached the attempt very well, to the point to succeed in... changing old the 77/28 with guns of 75/27 trailer mounted, with good ammunition supply.
- (19) One of the first days, in the port of Tripoli, Rommel had been turned abruptly towards the official of the engineers disembarked with him: "Hundt - he said - make me 150 tanks" -, then, seeing the been astounded embarrassment of the lieutenant, he continued: he has sufficient wood and burlap and also Volkswagens here."
- (20) The Rommel Papers edited by B. LIDDELL HART, Harcoun, Brace and C., New York 1953, p. 103.
- (21) On 26 March will assume the denomination of Commander XX Army Corps, preserving the attributions in action.
- (22) Of these they were usefully employable, at the moment, 25,000 men of the X Army Corps.
- (23) DSCS, 14 Tele dated 20.2.1941, 23:00 hours, of the Comando Superiore signed by Roatta. Undoubtedly the general tone was in resumption, but the comments could not lack. If in the within the department of complaint and the critics they regarded in kind the petty life of the combatant, more high level emerged strict appraisals, For giving an idea of that a meaningful episode bubbled in many filler minds. On 11 March the 44th 47/32 gun company, disembarked at Tripoli between the 16 and 26 February in the conditions previously indicated, and started on 10 March towards Sirte in reinforcement to the Bologna Inf. Div., accidentally met road meeting the commander of the division, which, inquired on the wanderings of the unit and please for the order with which he was introduced, it turned to the men some words in order to exhort them to face the ever present risks and finished with a phrase as well as cliché how much clear; " We try to win the war, then we will reckon within. (testimony of Gen. Augustin Spano, to then lieutenant, commander of the company).

- (24) To the end of 1940 the Commando of the 2nd Wing, stationed in Sicily, had been transferred in the territory of the 2nd National Air Zone and replaced by the Aeronautical Command Sicily.
- (25) Situation on 16.2.1941.
- (26) GIUSEPPE SANTORO, *L'Aeronautica italiana nella seconda guerra mondiale*, vol. II, ed. Esse, Roma 1957, p.68..
- (27) On 7 February in the historical diary of the OKW was written: "the repeated Italian news on the presence of a second English armored division in Libya seems to be more and more reliable. For converged, English convinced quickly that the Germans had an entire armored army corps, while he was disembarked and employed only the 5th light division, cfr. cp. HANS-OTTO BEHRENDT, *Rommels Kenntnis vom Feind im Afrikafeldzug* (News on the enemy had from Rommel during the campaign of Africa), Rombach, Freiburg 1980, p.57.
- (28) *Hitler e Mussolini*, Rizzoli, Milan 1946, p.91.
- (29) The affluence plan previewed the following expirations. End of April: 15th German Arm.Div. and *Trento* Mot. Div.; end of May: *Torino* Inf. Div. and *Trieste* Mot. Div.; end of June: motor vehicles for the three divisions in place; end of July: logistic completion.
- (30) DSCSAS, tele 01/7267/op. dated 14.3.1941 of the Comando Superiore.
- (31) The agreements in logistic matter taken in that period established that for the supplying in the Intendente A.S. would have supplied to the Italian units and the quartermaster of the DAK to those Germans, with the exception of provisioning, that it would have been cargo of the Intendancy also for the Germanic troops, naturally according to the tables of the levy of these last.
- From Tripoli the flow of supply and evacuations of the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* would have followed the water way, at least until to when the availability of trucks had not concurred different, with a coastal flotilla composed of hulls of 2-400 tons until Nofilia, logistics base of the German corp. A second flotilla of boats, tugs and litters would have supplied to the drainage in port in any point of the coast that became necessary.
- The calculations begin had to be reported to a force of 32,000 men and 8,000 wheeled and tracked means, with an average daily consumption of 500 tons of fuel.
- (32) the following day was constituted near the Command of the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* a liaison office with Gen. Calvi di Bergolo in charge. A German official of connection was sent to the Commander of the division *Ariete*.
- (33) The detachment sent to garrison Marada comprised one company of formation with three platoons with 37 mm antitank guns, 20 mm machine-guns and guns, one section 20 mm antiaircraft, one battery of 75/27, one radio section and a services nucleus.
- (34) The 5th light division was composed of:
- Division command;
 - 3rd Recce group, with two companies of armored car, a company motorcyclists and one of heavy weapons;
 - 39th, 605th and 606th *Panzerjaeger* group, each with three companies of 9-12 pieces of 37 mm and 50 mm;
 - 2nd and 8th machine-gun battalion armored vehicles, each with three machine-gun companies and one pioneers;

- 5th armored regiment with three battalions;
- 33rd antiaircraft artillery battalion with guns of 37 mm and 88mm ;
- 39th transmissions unit;
- 669th Supply Command with several columns;
- Various services unit.

In total: 9,300 men, 27 armored car, 55 Mk II tanks of 9 tons., 102 Mk III tanks of 20 tons., 28 Mk IV tanks of 21 tons., 1,800 wheeled and half tracked vehicles, 111 antitank guns

(35) DSCSAS, f. 01/2712/op. dated 16.3.1941. The division make up was given as:

- Division Command;
- 8th regiment bersaglieres with three battalions;
- 72nd, 132nd and 142nd 47/32 companies;
- 32nd tank regiment with three L 3 tank battalions;
- 132nd artillery with two groups of 75/27;
- 132nd mixed truck formation;
- Various services unit.

Altogether it was be a matter of 5,100 men, 117 L3 tanks, of which 23 flamethrower, 24 guns of 75/27, 24 antitank guns of 47/32, 16 machine-gunner of 20 mm, 760 motor vehicles and between 700 tricycles and motorcycles.

(36) DSCS, verbal report dated 18.3.1941.

(37) Five divisions in Cyrenaica, of which two armored, seven divisions in Egypt until the Delta included, five others to the Suez Canal, for a total of 17 divisions.

(38) Report 6013 -41 dated 17.3.1941, appendix 1. The Italian translation of the original German text was edited by the same DAK command and is reported in full in it's linguistically rather rough shape.

(39) The demands for the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* already had been forwarded:

- three recon groups to great autonomy, with pioneers, self-propelled artillery batteries, antitank, motorized platoons with Volkswagen and of own aircraft of connection and recon;
- a parachutists regiment;
- a heavy artillery regiment with three groups;
- three battalions flamethrower pioneers with antitank guns and Volkswagen, rather than flame-throwing tanks;
- three motorize platoons with antitank automatic arms and for commando type actions;
- a smoke discharging group,

For the 5th light was necessary: a regiment of mot. Artillery, a motorized battalion rather than motorcyclists and an armored battalion pioneers

(40) For the Italian part following were thought closely necessary reinforcements:

- two regiments mot. artillery of 150 mm (one for the X Corp and one for the DAK);
- a mot. antiaircraft artillery battalion per division, with five batteries, three heavy and two light;
- two mot. antitank regiments artillery, with three groups, per for army corps;
- ten labor battalions and five road work battalions, possibly all motorized, and water teams with probe systems

(41) For the 5th air wing were demanded:

- one squadron of far recon for the X Corp;
- one squadron from recon and one of connection for the *Ariete* Arm. Div.;

- a group of Ju 87;
 - three groups of fighter bomber;
 - two groups of bombers;
 - three groups of transport.
- (42) D. IRVING, op. cited, pp. 82-83.
- (43) E. ROMMEL, op. cited, p. 20.
- (44) On 24 January -26 February: *Ariete* Arm. Div; 11 February-20 March: 5th Light Division; 27 February-11 March: *Trento* Mot. Div..
- (45) DSCS, f. 7644/Op. dated 28.3.1941 of the chief officer of Stato Maggiore Generale.
- (46) E. ROMMEL, op. cited, p. 14.
- (47) DSCSAS, verbal report dated 29.3.1941.
- (48) DSCSAS, f. 01/3249 Op. dated 31.3.1941 of the Comando Superiore.
- (49) WINSTON CHURCHILL, *The second world war*, Part II, vol. I, Mondadori, Milan 1950, pp. 87-88.
- (50) The issue of the training was taken with much seriousness. The ministry of the war in October 1940 had given to instructions to Wavell for the constitution of a logistics base for the theatre of the Middle East (excluded the Iraq and the East Africa), in a position to feed 14 divisions (approximately 500,000 men) in June 1941 and 23 divisions (approximately 800,000 men) in June 1942. In this program of necessary self-sufficiency of the theater of operations the training requirements administrated. They were, therefore, been prepared the School of General Staff of the Middle East, a School for the tactical training, one for the employment of the arms, one of physical education, one for cadet officers, one for conductors and mechanics motor vehicles and armored means and a Combined operations center. To such part organization, the Australian and New Zealand forces had own schools of training, therefore as they existed some for the various allies; free French, Polish. Moreover there were the schools for the Royal Air, Force. Ultimately a number of really important steps`.
- (51) FREDERICK W. WINTERBOTHAM, *Ultra secret*, Mursia, Milan 1976, p. 79.
- (52) Seems that only on 8 March the intelligence has characterized Gen. Rommel not identified as the German commander (I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, vol. II, H.M.S.O., London 1956, p. 10).
- In truth the thing appears a little strange. According to Winterbotham, London knew in mid February that Rommel had arrived at Tripoli. A little later Ultra intercepted a message from Rommel to the OKW, with which he gave news to have assumed the command of the troops in that front (F. W. WINTERBOTHAM, op. cited, p. 79).
- (53) JOHN CONNELL, *Wavell*, Collins, London 1964, p. 385.
- (54) The expeditionary Corp it had to comprise the following major units: 1st armored brigade, New Zealand division, 6th Australian division, 7th Australian division and Polish brigade.
- (55) R.J. COWNS, *Lord Wavell*, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1964, p. 355.

- (56) The 3rd Hussars had 29 serviceable tanks of 52; the 5th tank regiment with 23 *cruisers* of 52; the 6th tank of one squadron M 13 and on 30 March of two squadrons on 10 April.
- (57) The arrivals amounted to 2,341 means in January, to 2,049 in February, 725 in March and to 705 in April.
- (58) J. CONNELL, op, cited, pp, 385-386.
- (59) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited, p. 234. Letter dated 26 March.
- (60) Ibid, pp. 234-235. Letter dated 27 March.
- (61) The 20th and 26th brigades had been yielded from the 7th Australian division, in place of the 18th and 26th brigades that the 9th division had to put to disposition of the expeditionary Corp for Greece. In the meantime the 18th brigade had been in charge of the conquest of Giarabub.
- (62) The "colonial armored division" was expression employed by the English initially in order to indicate a major unit equal to a light motorized division,
- (63) J.CONNELL, op, cited, pp. 390-391,
- (64) In truth it was be a matter of the Lt. Col. de Hauteclouque, that it had taken the simple name of Leclerc and had been authorized to put the degree of colonel for prestige reasons, For how much concern to the French engagement in the Nordafrica vds, JEAN-NOEL VINCENT, *Les Forces Franfaises dans lutte contre the Axe en Afrique*, Historical Service of the French Army, Vincennes 1983,
- (65) How much Fort Lamy has weighed to favor of allies can demonstrate the fact that in the 1942 flew approximately 3,000 Anglo-American aircraft along the Takoradi-Khartum-Cairo route and that in the same year a good 7,000 allied aircraft flew over that base directed towards Egypt or Russia.
- (66) The column had been sighted from a *ghibli* reconnaissance aircraft, but evidently exchanged for Italian, In fact the garrison of Cufra did not come put in alarm,
- (67) The mobile column was composed of the Saharan company and the Saharan section: 4 officials, 6 non-commissioned officers, 13 national and 51 Libyans, Had 15 motor vehicles and were armed with 6 submachine guns, 9 machine-guns and 4 machine-gunner of 20 mm, Had an autonomy of a month of provisions, 5 days water and fuel for 600 kilometers,
- (68) The invitation was given to surrender in leaflets dropped from aircraft, the text was as follows:
'defenders of Giarabub: your bosses probably there have said we have occupied the whole of Cyrenaica, 115 thousand prisoners and capturing large amounts of materials, our troops have marched now on Tripoli, your sacrifice is so pointless and also the route of retreat is closed, Expect; We will treat you well",
- Immediately after the fall of Bardia (5 January) had been launched leaflets that read: « your every resistance is futile, you will be crushed by our 80-ton tanks? The Empire does not forgive, Give Up!",
- (69) In the post-war period Adm, Weichold had to comment that, given its purpose, it was not necessary to bind the squad: "*It would have been enough to mock offensive action on British supply routes, with the most frequency possible; Therefore such actions would not be absolutely necessary to keep secret about you the dates of*

exiting from the ports, With similar tactics of threat would not have had neither decisive importance that the British fleet comprised three battleships or a single one, because the Italian divisions (...) with their advanced speed could have only accepted a formal action in favorable force ratios (Cfr, A, JACHINO, *Tramonto di una grande marina* cit., p. 260).

- (70) On purpose of the date of the chosen operation without a precise indication on the enemy, Adm. Jachino found that a good intelligence agency in Greece or an accurate and organic aerial exploration in the eastern Mediterranean would have introduced Rome that the British convoys made the back and forth between Alexandria and Pirco the every three days. Therefore the probability of encounter with a convoy at sea was much too low in order to justify the great fuel oil consumption that the action would have tax (A. Jachino, op. cited, p. 259).
- (71) For the battles of Gaudio and Matapan one sends back ANGEL) ACHINO, the surprise of Matapan, Mondadori, Milan 1957 and above all *Gaudio and Matapan*, cited; GIUSEPPE FIORAVANZO, *La guerra nel Mediterraneo, Le azioni navali dal 10 giugno 1940 al 31 marzo 1941* (volume I), USMM, Rome 1959..
- (72) Published in the supplement of the London Gazette of the 31 July 1947.
- (73) ANDREW B. CUNNINGHAM, the odyssey of a sailor, Garzanti, Milan 1952, pp. 171-173.
- (74) I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, op. cited, p.62.
- (75) JOHN POTTER and CHESTER NIMITZ, *Sea Power: to naval history*, New York 1959.
- (76) F.W. WINTERBOTHAM, *op. cited*, p. 80.

Second Chapter THE FIRST ITALIAN - GERMAN COUNTER-OFFENSIVE

1. THE OCCUPATION OF BENGHAZI (1st PHASE).

On the eve of the counter-offensive the Italian order of battle was the following ⁽¹⁾:

Comando Superiore Armed Forces A.S.:

- Comando Superiore Royal Carabinieri,
- Comando Superiore Artillery,
- Comando Superiore Engineers,
- Quartermaster North Africa,
- Armored Division. *Ariete*,
- Motorized Division. *Trento*,
- truck regiment of the Comando Superiore.

X army corps:

- Inf. Div. *Pavza*,
- Inf. Div *Bologna*,
- Inf. Div *Brescia*.

XX army corps:

- Garian-Nalut Area (Inf. Div *Savona*)
- Zuara Area,
- Homs Area,
- Citadel of Tripoli,
- Fort of Tripoli
- Libyan Sahara Command

5th Air Fleet:

- 13th Air Div, *Pegaso*,
- 14th Air Bd. *Rex*.

Rommel could already count on the units of the DAK online (practically the 5th Light) and on those Italians placed at his disposition for the employment: the *Ariete* and *Brescia* ⁽²⁾. To the height of Sirte was drawn up the X Army Corps with the *Pavia* and *Bologna*.

To give an idea of the unexpected and unpredictable fast twist of events, let's say right away that the first group of large units led the entire operation from el Agheila to the Egyptian border and is difficult to follow a indicate regulated sequence of tactical actions. Guidance only and for ease of displaying three phases can be identified sufficiently distinct, although subsequent immediately and seamlessly: surprise surge up in Benghazi (31 March- on the night4 April), advanced from Agedabia and Benghazi on Derna-Mechili (4-8 April), Tobruk and investment reach the border (April 9-13).

Altogether Rommel had to his immediate command approximately 25,000 men; 231 tanks from 10 to 21 tons, 117 light tanks of 3.5 tons and 27 armored cars from 5 to 8 tons; 72 field Artillery Pieces and 220 antitank Guns:

Unit	Men	Armored Cars.	Tanks		Artillery	
			Light	Med.	Field.	AT
5th Light	9,000	27	55	130	-	111
Arm. Div. <i>Ariete</i>	7,000	-	117	46	36	61
Inf. Div <i>Brescia</i>	9,000	-	-	-	36	48

However the goal was limited - hold possession of Marsa el-Brega - Rommel could not ignore an elementary comparison of forces. Believed to have faced, like the early opponents, two mechanized regiments and a Australian battalion, to whose flanks were two British armored divisions, one Australian and one French brigade. The cornerstone of the comparison was made by tanks. The technical comparison was decisive beyond the number and he had already experienced the validity of its own facilities in France ⁽³⁾. The examination of the base (see next page) gave decisive superiority awareness in open field, and it was necessary to add the tactical capabilities of the commanders and the training level of the crews: the 7th British Armored Division was certainly skillful but equally certainly shabby; as regards the alleged 4th Armored Division, do not possess elements of judgment on his preparation for the fight, however, the Germans had already successfully passed the test of fire. And there was another particular technician who manifested a certain weight. The German Cannon

COMPARISON BETWEEN THE MAIN GERMAN AND ENGLISH TANKS IN APRIL 1941		
Characteristics of the tank	German	English
Light Tank:		
Type:	Panzer Kw II C	Cruiser A9
Weight	9 tons	12.7 tons
Armor: front and lateral	15mm	6mm
Main armament:	20/55 Gun	40/53 Gun
Motor power:	140 HP	150 HP
Max road Speed:	55 km/h	37 km/h
Road range	200 km	240 km
Medium Tank:		
Type:	Panzer Kw type: III F	Cruiser A10
Weight	20.3 tons.	14.5 tons.
Armor: front	30 mm	30 mm
Armor: lateral	30 mm	8 mm
Main armament:	50/42 gun	40/53 gun
Motor power:	300 HP	150 HP
Max road Speed:	40 km/h	25 km/h
Road range	175 km	160 km:
Type:	Panzer IV Type D	Cruiser A13
Weight	21 tons	15 tons
Armor: front	30 mm	30 mm
Armor: lateral	20 mm	8 mm
Main armament:	75/24 gun	40/53 gun
Motor power:	300 HP	340 HP
Max road Speed:	40 km/h	50 km/h.
Road range	200 km	140 km

of 50/42 for tank had a drilling shell with 685 m/s initial velocity and was able to exceed to 1000 meters wide a armor of 48 mm; the shell of the 75/24 piece had a low initial velocity (385 m/s) but to 1000 meters was drilling of 49 mm armor. In essence, only the *Matilda* (front amour and turret of 75 mm, 47 mm side amour) was invulnerable at that distance, but it was enough to look at 400-500 meters to get the upper hand. By contrast the British 40/53 cannon, which was the initial velocity of 853 m/s, possessed less penetration because of the very low weight of shell. On the M 13/40 something has already been said. Both sides now

now possessed. The tank (14 tons) had a 47/32 piece of good ballistic qualities for that time: 675 m/s initial velocity anti-tank projectile (with rear delay fuse), 1.5 kg heavy and able to pierce armor of 30 mm at 1000 meters. The serious deficiencies mechanical in nature, were due to the quick tests, and were eliminated from the production of the first months of the 1941⁽⁴⁾.

These premises, the structure of the 5th light and the inability to exploit usefully light tanks battalions of the *Ariete* led to a result in the operating field: the use of several battle groups set up a variable according to the developments of the fighting or better of the rapid movement in the desert. Rommel took them across the counter-offensive and they said so. If we had moved the remarked appeal to the mobile column for the 10th army part, now the note falls. There is no contradiction: now the columns are held tightly in his hand, in a clear and operational design pursued vigorously, and most importantly, have more quality in terms of ripe nerve.

Information sources of Rommel were essentially represented by aerial reconnaissance and land, especially the first. Less considered the contribution of radio interception, because initially led by one platoon⁽⁵⁾. However Rommel was relying big on their intuition. One day he exclaims: "*I have the gift of predicting where the enemy will be most vulnerable*"⁽⁶⁾.

On the morning of 31 March began the offensive reconnaissance towards the narrows of Marsa el-Brega. It had been entrusted to a German made tactical group-with a company of *Panzer*, a *Panzerjaeger's* and a battery of 88. On the right, with Bir es-Suera, operated the 3rd recon and the Santamaria group. The latest news on the enemy they believe at most three infantry battalions, one mechanized reconnaissance regiments and two artillery groups. In fact the position was held by the *King's Dragoon Guards* and 2nd support group composed of the *Tower Hamlets Rifles*, a machine-gun company of *Northumberland*, two Australian companies, the 104th horse artillery and 3rd anti-tank horse artillery (sketch No. 13). Earlier, about ten kilometers to the Northeast, was the 3rd Armored Brigade. Quickly exceeded the strength of the advanced elements, the tactical Group took the leading position

and at 10:15, following a raid by *Stukas*, attempted to force the close without succeeding in the purpose: the artillery fire arrested him at six kilometres from Marsa el-Bregao shortly after 14:00 a second wave of *Stukas* prepared decisive effort. Gen. Streich introduced in action a machine-gun battalion and tighten under other artillery units, so that, when the new attack was launched along the coastal strip, the English right was breached and the resistance quickly ceased ⁽⁷⁾, especially as Bir es-Suera was occupied by the flanking column.

To be honest the Gen. Latham, Commander of the support group, had asked in the afternoon the 3rd Armored Brigade on the German flank, but Gen. Gambier-Parry, who knew of the reluctance of the much more experienced 7th Armored Division to engage in night fighting, estimated that lacked sufficient time to assemble and perform a counterattack before the fall of darkness. Consequently, the 2nd Armored Division stationed himself thirty kilometers southwest of Agedabiao German losses were insignificant, while British losses amounted to fifty *Bren carriers* and 30 trucks.

Out the purpose of offensive reconnaissance, on 1 April took a break. Already during the fighting on March 31 the bulk of 5th light had moved east of el Agheila and the 12th bersaglieri Battalion had brought to Giofer, along the Maaten track for Marada, to protect the exposed flank or immediately after the occupation of Marsa el-Brega the *Ariete* Division received orders to concentrate in the triangle el Agheila-Maaten-Giofer el Barachim and the *Brescia* to tighten toward Bescer Maaten via Balbia. Rommel seemed willing to comply with the program. In fact, in addition to the provisions in order to gather the forces between Marsa el-Brega and Bir es-Suera, had decided on the deployment of a vast minefield against any enemy attempt to retake the narrows. To noon on April 1 he went instead advanced command Gen. Streich. The news of air induced exploration to hypothesize a new British withdrawal. "*I couldn't give up the opportunity-* wrote Rommel-*and gave orders to attack the enemy at Agedabia and take this place, although such action was planned for the end of may»* ⁽⁸⁾. It seems that things have gone quite differently. According to Streich, Rommel, with well determined to heel an opponent with aggressive elements to

test the situation facing Ajdabiya, non appeared-as mentioned above-still immediate prosecution - oriented effort overall. Simply, jokingly, asked the Commander of the 5th light: “*well, when we see such Agedabta?*”. The order had requested the resumption of contact with the exploring element and thought can continue the action, but was not well sure really thought over, so just answer generally: “*we’ll see what we can do.*” Then, left alone, revised information received and decided to move the next day with the entire Division, without informing Rommel of the question ⁽⁹⁾. These same envisaged in the afternoon the situation at the Comando Superiore:

“(…) The C. T. A. ⁽¹⁰⁾, with an advanced units pursues the enemy fleeing towards Agedabia, in accordance with the rules of combat of the German army. The bulk of the Corp, until clarification of the situation of the enemy around Ajdabiya, reaches and remains in the area of Marsa el Brega-Maaten-Giofer close West of el Agheila (…)” ⁽¹¹⁾,

and asked to bring at the earliest the motorized Division *Trento*, not that you start moving forward of the Italian X Corps. In the first of two periods set aside the haughty form, has seemed to soften that still bring about the attack that will constitute the main feature of Rommel's command, hiding the intent of not respecting the directives with the reference to “*a advanced units*”. Even as then stated explicitly by the person concerned.

In fact, in the evening, he had to come to Rommel the decision in force, because the next morning at around 8:30 he gave verbal orders to Gen. Baldassare, in the presence of Gen. Calvi di Bergolo. The employment of Ajdabiya had to be carried out by the 5th light Division and the *Ariete*, both on the front row. The first was to operate on the left of the via Balbia, preceded by two strong Vanguard units whose left more advanced; the second on the right side of the road, also with two Vanguard units, whose most advanced right. Thus Ajdabiya would fall for double turning. Starting point should be the path from Alizir (North-East of Marsa el-Brega) turns Southeast, almost normally to the coast. The beginning of the attack was scheduled for the following day, 7:00 April 3, at the behest of DAK. Rommel, however, reserved the right to issue further provisions, detailed in a meeting fixed to two division commanders in that same

afternoon to the road inspectors house, sixteen kilometers east of Marsa el-Brega. According to against Streich, Rommel would be attributed *a posteriri* of an initiative not wholly his. In fact only at 13:00 rejoined the command of the 5th Light and showing surprised asked: "*can you tell what's going on?*". Streich replied: "*I thought that we should not give the enemy the chance to retreat back to entrench, and then I pushed forward the entire Division and I'm attacking to Ajdabiya*". Whereupon Rommel commented: "*to tell the truth, these weren't my orders, but I support*"⁽¹²⁾ (sketch No. 14).

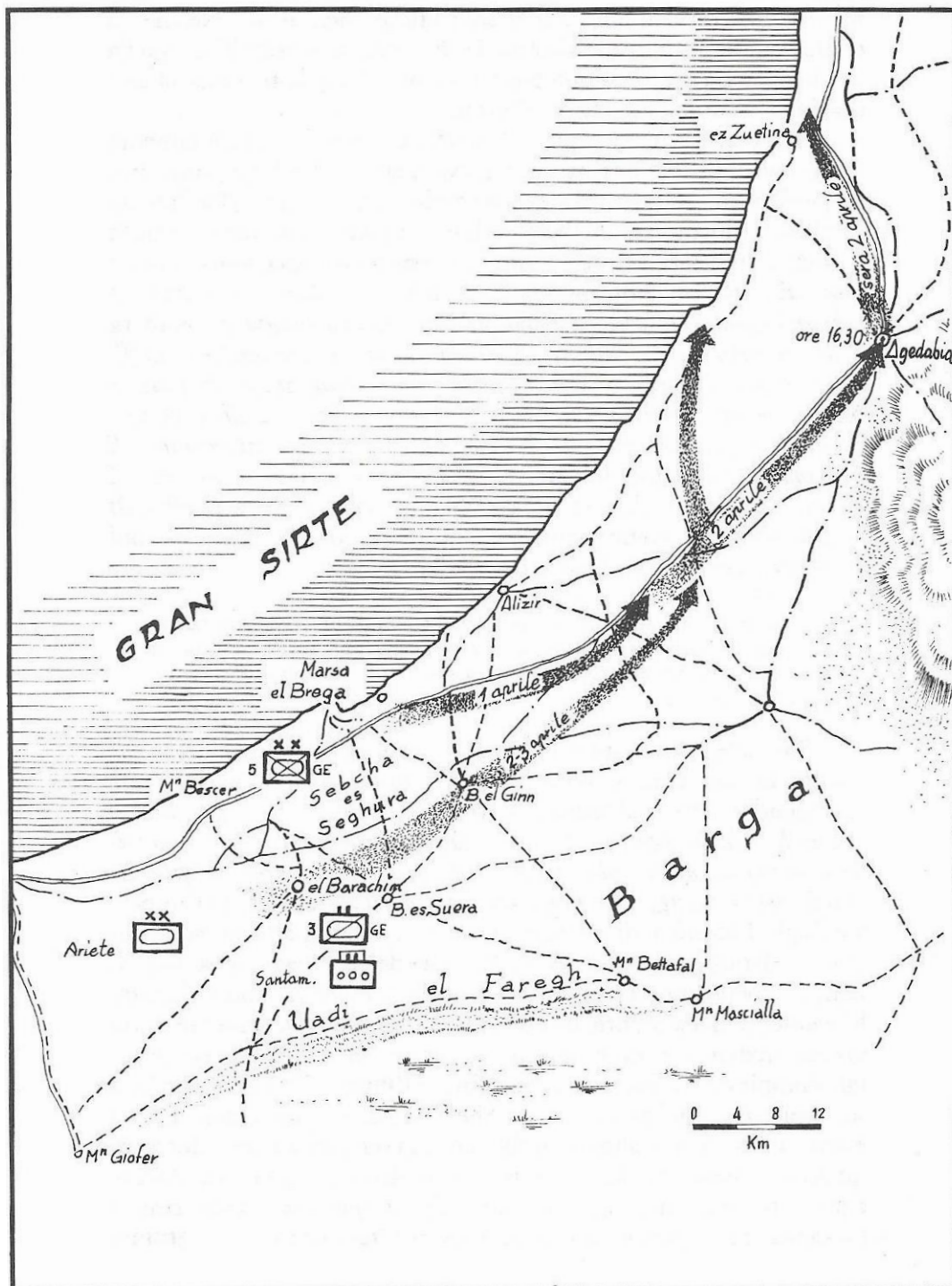
Since the dawn of the 3rd German explorers had taken contact with the support group. Gambier-Parry, who still was not opposite to visible preparations for an attack, he probably did not realized a defensive outline because shortly before midday (but to receive the entire message it took two hours) received from an order strongly binding Neame: the support group should continue to block the via Balbia for as long as possible without risking to be flanked laterally, and the 3rd Armored Brigade could not be used without the prior permission of Neame. Of course there was a particular reason about it. Uncertainty about the German effort, gravitation on Benghazi or Mechili, the Brigade had to be ready to move towards Sceleidima, North of Antelat so to lie on the side of the enemy in the first hypothesis. In with time, however, it had to be in conditions to move towards Msus, logistics base of the Division, surpassing the harshness of the escarpment of Sceleidima.

It wasn't an easy time; the support group was strongly committed and only a counterattack and the intervention of a squadron of *cruisers* managed to stem losses and to allow a corridor for the whole Division towards Ajdabiya. Gambier-Parry, read the order Neame, realized that wasn't the case to intervene prematurely the 3rd Armored Brigade, but asked to be allowed its use even for obvious reasons of timeliness. Among other things, was orienting the possible abandonment of Ajdabiya overnight and wanted the two columns, retreating toward Antelat, they supported each other. In his opinion the prioritized to the barrier of coastal route risked compromising the coming up of the Armored Division, especially since remained with 22 medium tanks and 25 light efficient, in addition to some 20 M 13, and expected to lose

The occupation of Agedabia and Benghazi

L'OCCUPAZIONE DI AGEDABIA E DI BENGASI

Schizzo n. 14



one vehicle every ten miles to the only effect of the wear. Neame, who saw much more dangerous road to Mechili for Benghazi, was to grant to Gambier-Parry requesting freedom of action when Wavell intervened.

The Commander in Chief of the Middle East was absolutely unhappy with everything and everybody. He had already accepted the bad report about the loss of Marsa el-Brega. According to him, the Brigade's tanks should intervene immediately: at least they inflicted casualties on the Germans before stopping for mechanical failures. *"Everything seemed to go wrong-commented-damaged tanks, communications for air, the enemy air force committed deep on all vehicles. Gambier-Parry was not a sufficiently experienced Commander to face a similar state of affairs and Neame if your Command was to depart, to Barce, to direct a worrying situation with dispatches, rather than intervene in person"*⁽¹³⁾. On the morning of 2 April he telegraphed to London, to the Committee of Chiefs of staff, to report the loss of some advanced positions but highlighting the impressions of Neame about the conditions of the armored vehicles:

"since I can't put in other tank units for at least another three or four weeks-to add - I cautioned not to compromise the existence of three brigades even if this implies a substantial withdrawal, perhaps even from Benghazi"⁽¹⁴⁾.

Then, at 10:00, after hearing the latest news from the front, decided to go into Cyrenaica to see with their own eyes what was happening: "I became immediately aware that Neame had lost control of the match and was not making the effort to retake it in the only way possible: by going to the front".

So in the afternoon did send a message to Gen. O'Connor, giving it a mandate to detect Neame. Then departed in flight for Barce. While immersed in the examination of the situation South of Benghazi, came the Gambier-Parry request can freely deploy of the 3rd Armored Brigade. Decidedly opposed. Couldn't believe that Rommel had amassed in such a short time for such a complex of forces from retaking the whole of Cyrenaica. Therefore his aim couldn't be that Benghazi and this was not to be sold without at least force the opponent to an effort by some consistency or ultimately, the 2nd Armored Division was to act together until North of el-Magrum, on the coastal strip. If the enemy pressure was found to be excessive, the Group

would support delay action exercised and of attrition while the armored brigade, proceeding to Antelat-Sceleidima, you would be deployed south of el-Abiar to cover the left flank of the Australian 9th Division. Wavell's order was issued shortly before 21:00, but only at 02:30 on 3 April arrived at their destination. Now the events were taking over. The armored brigade was scattered, disorganized and short of fuel; the support group had lost half of his troops and was not able to block the road to Benghazi. Then Gambier-Parry considered himself obliged to withdraw all the large unit, and not only the armored brigade, to el-Abiar for a necessary reorganization. The message with this reply arrived in Barce, the advanced command of Cyrenaica, at 6 a.m. and made vain any intention of resistance before in Benghazi.

"The jarring of 3 April is that of a continuous increase of misfortune and confusion" ⁽¹⁵⁾. And, certain, the 3rd Armored Brigade was the unit that best had to stand. The early hours of that day-evidently not having received a swift countermand-the 6th *Royal Tanks* had moved in the direction of Ajdabiya, as Divisional rearguard, and only at dawn, when arrived at about ten kilometers from the locality, without friends or enemies, they knew that the rest of the Division was already in retreat. North of Antelat, on the road to Sceleidima. It is not enough. Shortly after noon the 5th *Royal Tanks* had orders to *"to engage and destroy the enemy tanks from Antelat"*, but soon discovered that it was the 6th *Royal Tanks* (equipped with M 13 of war prizes) which proceeded northward. Later the 1st horse artillery was given up for lost.

Neame had issued new orders at 10:30: demolition plan for Benghazi and surroundings; retreat of the 2nd Armored Division North of Sceleidima with the triple task of preventing the enemy from the coast to the Inland desert area, give security to the Australians on the left and to protect the depots of Msus. At 15:00 arrived in turn to Barce Gen. O'Connor, who had brought his associate the new Brigadier J.F.L. Combe, former Commander of the 11th Hussars. At the end of a brief interview with Neame ⁽¹⁶⁾, O'Connor came to Wavell, who saw *"tired and depressed."* To O'Connor, the situation seemed *"very confused"*; among other things, nobody knew where exactly was finished the command of Gambier-Parry. Since the 9th Australian

held the Escarpment of Regima ad el-Abiar, Wavell had still some hopes that Rommel crashed at Benghazi. Anyway there was a matter to be solved urgently. O'Connor felt very embarrassed: regardless of the difficulties resulting from adverse events so openly, he did not know the two divisions nor was he known to them. Then, the maneuver, as it was, was started and at that point there was little change. Also thought that the exoneration of Neame were unfair and inappropriate, happening in the midst of battle. Therefore, he resolved to ask Wavell to reverse the decision to give him the post of Commander of Cyrenaica: he would, however, detain willingly a few days be ready to offer Neame total collaboration. The proposal-which most likely Neame would have preferred the replacement-was received and at 20:00 Wavell left for Cairo.

Waiting him for many hours a restless message of Churchill:

"It would be extremely desirable that the German offensive against the Cyrenaica was cut short. Any defeat inflicted on the Germans would have far-reaching psychological consequences. It would be fair to cede land for purpose maneuvering, but an eventual definitive retreat from Benghazi would be very painful. I can't-understand how the enemy would be able to develop considerable strength of the attack at the end of this long and arid coastal road, nor can I believe that right now his attack can be supplied. If this core, which went forth against you, could be cut off you might enjoy a prolonged distension or naturally, if it manages to still move forward, gradually destroys the results of your victory or have men under hand like O'Connor or Creagh to address this problem of border?"⁽¹⁷⁾.

Wavell did respond by his Chief of staff, Gen. Dorman-Smith, the next morning: "*General Wavell went yesterday by plane to Cyrenaica. All the points you mentioned have been taken into account by him*"⁽¹⁸⁾.

The occupation of Ajdabiya, with its precious freshwater sources, occurred at around 16:30 of April 2, after a short struggle: a company of 5th Panzer Regiment was presented on stage winning easily. While advanced elements proceeded towards Zuetina, the DAK immediately sent provisions for consolidation: the 5th Light remained at Ajdabiya until it was replaced by *Brescia* Inf. Div., which was scheduled for the 4th. Then had to organize a defense astride the via Balbia in Ajdabiya-Zuetina sector, starting

reconnaissance toward Antelat-Suluq and Ghemines-Benghazi. The *Brescia* had to take over, as mentioned, the Germans around Ajdabiya, supervising with mobile elements to Gialo and occupying el-Haseiat. The *Ariete*, which would absorb the Santamaria, on the 3rd should take five to ten kilometres north of Ajdabiya, settling in defense, facing Southwest. Everything could be regarded as an indication of an operational pause, however the true intentions of Rommel began to seep out and show himself very far from the idea of giving time and space to the opponent. The same communication made at the OKW was interpreted as guidance to continue: "*the enemy has shown the April 2 only with rearguard that the attack will fade. Do not expect a serious resistance before Suluq (...)*". Gariboldi, naturally, felt these symptoms and telegraphed: "*by the news receipts I can assume that You will continue to advance and this is not what I ordered. Please await me before continuing the movement*".

On the morning of 3rd Rommel moved instead to Ajdabiya. He was convinced the British, excessively overestimating the consistency of his force, holding out to avoid decisive confrontation, preferring to limit, to abandon Cyrenaica. The prisoners amounted to about 800 and early interrogation was the general conviction of dealing with an entire German armored Corps. "*In the same afternoon - Rommel wrote - determined for this to remain in hot pursuit of the enemy in retreat and, if possible, take a hand across Cyrenaica*"⁽¹⁹⁾. In his mind he was completing the switch from small preliminary acts to major offensive, the grandiose design of the immediate achievement of the Egyptian border.

The possible routes were three. The Coast: Agedabia-Benghazi-Dema; Central: Ajdabiya-Antelat-Msus-Mechili; internal: Ajdabiya-Bir Ben Gania-el Gazala. The latter, an ancient caravan track, was that promised full success, though he was unaware of the passing ability. Therefore ordered the 5th Light, meanwhile, starting along the coast the 3rd Recon Group of von Wechmar and the *Ariete* to send to Ben Gania the Fabris column⁽²⁰⁾. It cannot be said that the immediacy of the unconditional accession in the project met most direct collaborators. The Commander of the 5th Light represented the wear of the vehicles, the Commander of the *Brescia* indicated how impractical of Bir Tengeder. Rommel

did not answer at first and journeyed by car to check the runway. After about twenty kilometers the Santamaria group reached, who proceeded "*in excellent formation*", and judged it "*relatively good for vehicles*", then turned back⁽²¹⁾. At Ajdabiya he waited for new. Streich had talked of being left with only 150 km fuel and that it took four days to refuel. Rommel ordered him curtly to unload all of the Division's vehicles, sending them that night at Arco dei Fileni, where was the logistics base, and be featured within the next night. Streich objected that for 24 hours, the army would remain literally immobilized, but Rommel insisted hard adding: "*so you save blood and we make sure the possession of Cyrenaica*"⁽²²⁾. The important thing for him was keeping the pressure on the enemy from the point exploring, hoping to follow within a day by significant rates of troops. Then departed on to Balbia this time: he wanted to see the situation of the recon group. Wechmar reached towards el-Magrumo no contact with the opponent; an Italian priest had brought news of the evacuation of Benghazi. Rommel immediately dispose for the continuation of the advance. In his personal journaling the DAK's Commander noted that day: "*from March 31 we attack with remarkable success. Tripoli must also notifying Rome and Berlin. I dared to various advance, despite opposing directives, because the occasion was auspicious. They will be followed by their fruits.*" He returned again to Ajdabiya, found Gariboldi waiting. In Tripoli, as in Rome and Berlin, they were "aware" of certain initiatives and these began to arouse apprehension.

Mussolini had been pleased with the employment of Marsa el-Brega and had charged the higher Commander N.A. to pay praise to Rommel, but at the same time showing them his stark thought about such actions, considered in the context of the situation "*and tell him that*" because upcoming events on the giulio and Albania front enter other divisions and other trucks had to necessarily "*delayed*". Gariboldi, who was perfectly agreed, replied on the same day of the 2nd:

"I express the opinion that transactions undertaken by General Rommel over agreed are careless range for all the considerations listed in the telegram to which I answer. I was granted employment close west Marsa el Brega that improved our defensive arrangement but with slowly progressive character.

General Rommel ever yearns, driven by successful offensive, was launched later. I ordered and I repeated orders to stop and I leave for him personally. I need to order more authoritative to convince him to remain within established action. Unless the order is not, to avoid new grounds officially inform momentum again praise Duce, together with possible your order must suspend advance”⁽²³⁾.

Then, confident of receiving a dispatch round the support required, went to achieve command of the *Afrikakorps*. The meeting, as reported by same Rommel, gave rise to a “*very lively discussion*”. Gariboldi began with the request being shown the situation, then forbade any development of action without the permission of the Comando Supremo. Rommel replied that he could not wait for provisions, which would have been overcome by the force of events, and that “*as a German General was to issue his orders according to the situation of the moment*”⁽²⁴⁾. And natural tension ascended quickly. Luckily a telegram from Berlin dissolved the knot. Not that the OKW was happy with how things went, far from it. Keitel and Halder were extremely alarmed by the possibility that the plans relating to Operation Barbarossa, already touched by the campaign against Greece, should undergo new obstacles. Therefore the first sent a radio, reminding the impetuous DAK's Commander that it was his task to keep engaged as many British forces was possible and that

“all offensive actions of limited extent, made necessary by this task, should not go beyond the ability of his poor forces orders (...).

Above all, he must avoid exposing to attack on his right flank, which would be discovered in the episode in the direction of Benghazi (...)”⁽²⁵⁾

and even after the arrival of the 15th Armored Division included the conduct of major offensive with possible Tobruk. However, the dispatch was given to Rommel only on the morning of April 4. On the other hand another message, sent by Berlin at 18:00 of the 3rd, allowed, where certain conditions were favorable, the continuation of the advance. This was shown to Rommel right in the middle of discussion with Gariboldi⁽²⁶⁾ and allowed him liberty of action. Gariboldi had to huddle in the shoulders. Back to Tripoli took vision of Mussolini's response:"

Your telegram 01 94/3283 came together with the news of the occupation of Ajdabiya & Zuetina. Since you have gone on the spot you will have realized the situation and maybe the danger they run units not strong enough, far removed from the remaining forces and who have no possibility of being easily replenished & quickly supported. But if clash against established feeling that the enemy through a period of crisis and that there are many chances of success, it would be extremely serious mistake not to take advantage of the favorable moment for all dare. Owing in that case supporting action with other forces quickly trucked, from Tripoli and the surrounding area. Only you can have all the elements needed to decide & to adjust action Gen. Rommel" ⁽²⁷⁾.

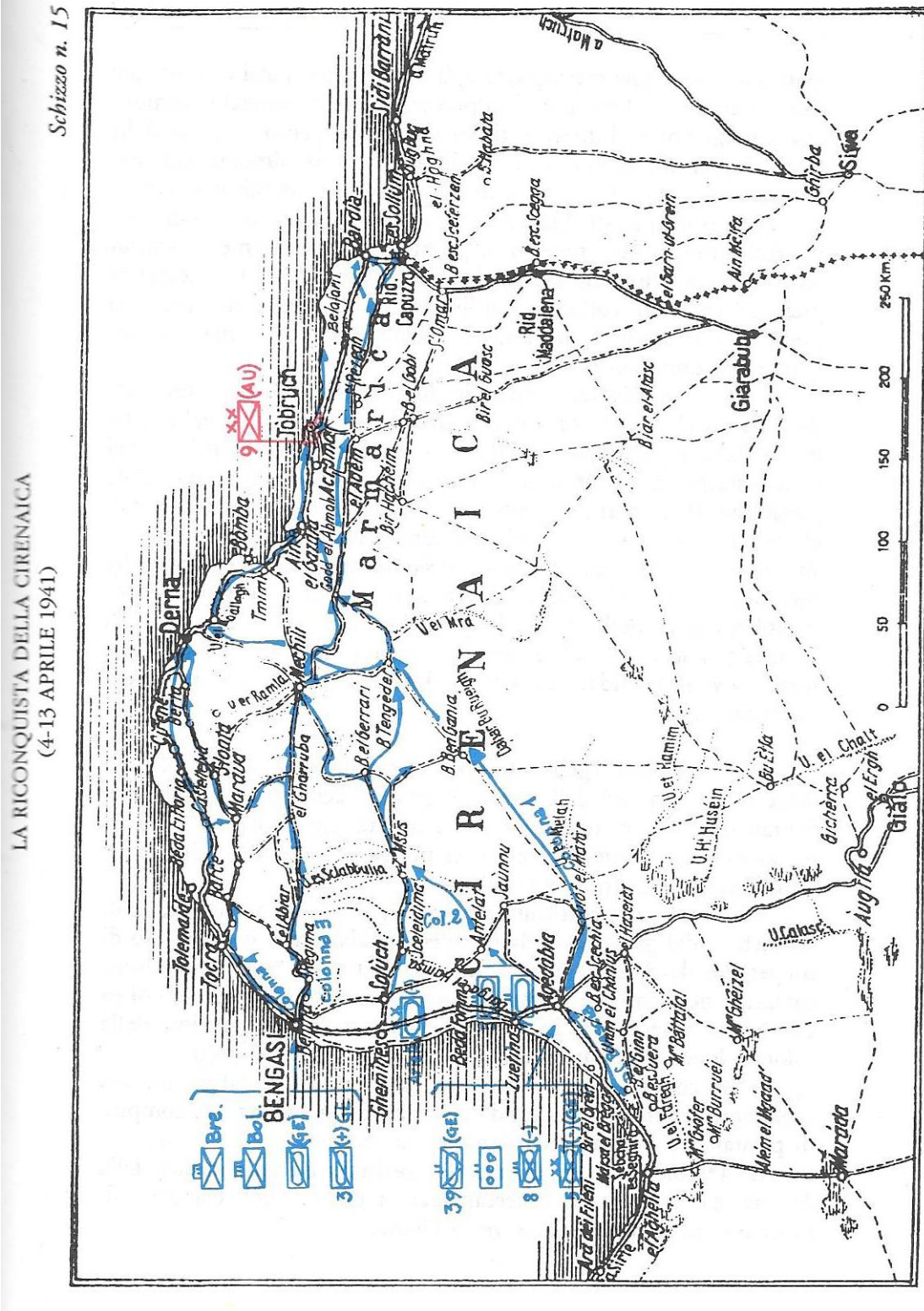
All in all, it is clear that the prospect of being able to take advantage of the unexpected state of affairs evident in front of the first exploratory thrusts most regretted not at all in Rome. Gariboldi was very annoyed because the delay of these directives of the Duce in relation to circumstances had exposed - tied as it was to the previous provisions - accurate to assume a "*phased approach*" that would have been forced to disavow. In fact he was unable to replicate the action of Rommel was simple and logical consequence of withdrawal undertaken by opponent beyond Benghazi. The episode, unfortunately not isolated, outlines the nature of the relations established since the beginning of the high Commander N. A. and Commander of the *Afrikakorps*. According to the agreements and the logic would be fully operational dependency, but in practice threatened to be substantially reversed, placing the Comando Superiore, and with it the Comando Supremo, in tow of the operational initiative of Rommel. Regardless of the apparent abnormality of the matter, that procedure was intended to put the Comando Superiore in the face of serious difficulties, as responsible for the Italian part, of all logistics operations.

The day closed with a flourish. At 21:00 the Fabris column had reached Giof el-Matar and the *Ariete* provided to be in place a small advanced depot.

2. THE BATTLE FOR DERNA AND EL - MECHILI (2nd phase).

The second phase of the counteroffensive translates into the maneuver to the encirclement of the British forces in the *gebel* Cyrenaica, pointing from Ajdabiya to Mechili to Tmimi and cutting so the only major road behind them. (sketch No. 15).

The conquest of Cyrenaica (4-13 April 1941)



Missing, in the documentation on record, evidence to reconstruct with precision the provisions given to the Germans, however clear the intent is clear to launch urgently the total available forces along all axes. Of course this could not take place in a strictly organic framework: large units were diluted to non-excessive distances in an absolute sense but sensitive on that land, the problem of supply was only solution with emergency measures taken from time to time, now they were given orders by Rommel on the drum, using what was at hand and for successive approximations.

The *Brescia* Division split into two blocks. The main body, consisting of all non-motorized elements, was to move into the area of Ajdabiya and ensure the balance possession. It is obvious that the influx of undocumented vehicles in organic units came to depend on the ability of the auto-grouping of transport of the Quartermaster corps. The Motorized elements, instead, from Benghazi had to bet on Barce -Derna and on Regima-Mechili along with German units. The *Ariete* Division and the 5th Light was entrusted to caging of the British forces focusing on the Gulf of Bomba to the desert slopes. In essence, the realization of the maneuver was entrusted to four mixed columns, preceded by strong avant-garde:

a) 1st column (Gen. Streich), the bulk of the 5th Light, a share of the *Ariete*, the Schwerin Group and Santamaria Group, tasked with advancing from Agedabia on el Giof Matar-Bir Ben Gania-Bir Tengeder then proceeds to Mechili, and then towards the Gulf of Bomba.

b) 2nd column, consisting of a share of the 5th Light (col. Olbrich) and the bulk of the *Ariete* (Gen. Baldassarre), tasked with converge from Antelat and from Suluq on Msus for blocking enemy armored forces were concentrated there and then proceed on Bir Belamed, holding on to contribute to the operations of the lateral columns, both on Tengeder and Mechili and northward.

c) 3rd column (Lt. col. Wechmar), formed by the German 3rd Recon Unit reinforced by elements of the *Brescia*, with the task of aiming from Benghazi, to Regima on Mechili.

d) the 4th column (Gen. Zambon), consisting of a share of *Brescia* and from German mechanized elements, with the task of proceeding for at Tocra and Barce towards Derna.

It is easy to determine the preference tune from Rommel using groups and tactical groupings, based often on choice of Commander in his opinion more particularly suitable for the performance of the specific assignment, without much regard to the organic constraints. A system made possible by a training conducted with uniform lines and a clear tactical doctrine, although brought almost to the extreme. A system that could recognize not always effective against Italian forces, often forced to improvise in front of problems proposed by tactical situations for which they were not trained or equipped.

The day of the 4th saw the launch a little labored breathing of the measures taken, especially along the inside. At dawn Lt. Col. Schwerin had reached Maj. Santamaria asking him to locate the Trigh el Abd, the track which was to take the first column. It was easier said than done, because the runway looked like a camel path poorly beaten, in fact, only in the evening it was possible to locate it. But for the opponent it was worse. The April 3 had been unlucky day of the 2nd Armored Division. In the late afternoon, while it was at Sceleidima, the aerial reconnaissance had reported a column of one hundred tanks and many vehicles, enemy, probably marching on Wsus from the direction of Antelat ⁽²⁸⁾. Gambier-Parry wanted to clarify the situation, but the provisions enacted had unhappy consequences: wrong movements, a disorder in the units and a certain loss of time. Furthermore intercepted an order was considered by Neame, who called the Division at el-Abiar. This led to the confusion. The Gen. Rex Rimington, Commander of the 3rd Armored Brigade, when he set out to Msus, remained uncertain about the order to be executed, then decided to stick to the initial ⁽²⁹⁾. Overnight Neame, arrived at the conviction that the enemy had gotten hold of Msus and not knowing where exactly was Gambier-Parry, ordered the concentration of the 2nd Armored Division at Mechili to stop any action from Wsus. This is the dejected message that is addressed 00:43 of the 4th Wavell:

"today the enemy armored and motorized forces advanced toward the North and northeast from Ajdabiya and aerial reconnaissance (...) confirmed the presence of enemy troops number 100 tanks and vehicles at Msus.

The actual weakness of the 2nd Armored Division makes it impossible for

advanced enemy control or prevent the occupation of Msus. Benghazi was evacuated and the demolitions carried out without losses nor difficulty (...). The location of the 9th Australian Division is untenable.

It is therefore my intention to retire on the Wadi Derna-Mechili but lack of tanks makes it impossible to ensure that it becomes necessary to further retreat (...). The 3rd Indian motor Brigade (...) moves to Mechili. No enemy advances on the desert track from Wsus. The 2nd Armored Division will continue the retreat and reach the 3rd Indian Brigade at Mechili.

The 9th Australian Division (...) will withdraw on the positions at the back of the Wadi Derna (...). Cyrenaica command will cease to work at 03:00 today 4 April and will resume to Maraua for a few hours and then move to Tmimi. It is not yet possible to calculate the losses (...). The maximum force of tanks at 11:20 3 April was 12 cruisers, 26 M 13 and 18 light tanks^{”(30)}.

On the morning of the 4th, though, while the Commander of Cyrenaica went on the Derna-Mechili for reconnaissance, Gen. O'Connor changed, on his behalf, the orders issued that night: the Australian 9th had to leave the positions Tocra-Regima at dusk and go east of Barce; the 2nd Armored Division had to leave at Msus a few patrols and gather at Charruba, about 60 kilometers east of el-Abiar, to protect the right of the Australians. Only in case of a worsening of the situation the Australian 9th would go to Cyrene and the 2nd Armored to Mechili.

In the afternoon the German 3rd Recon Group appeared at Regima. Where until noon was an Australian Brigade was now deployed on wide front 2/13th battalion with 51st artillery. Given the total lack of vehicles to transport the troops, the command of the Division was forced to move out of two battalions to Barce, yes you can make multiple trips with the only echelon of vehicles. Of course the 2/13th battalion managed to hold until the early hours of the next day, but with heavy losses. As to the 3rd Armored Brigade arrived at Msus in the morning of the 4th. If Rimington was pleased to find no Germans, was terrified when he realized that for a false alarm the majority of fuel deposits and other materials had been blown up by a motorized battalion French company, tasked to destroy everything before retiring to the North. Informed the Division of Command and supply difficulties, the Brigade received available to withdraw also northwards, in Charruba, a village that reached on the afternoon of April 5th. The 5th *Royal Tanks* were left with eight medium and fourteen light tanks; the

The 6th *Royal Tanks* had lost all M.13 on the road: there remained only two with little gasoline. Moreover, in the activities of the enemy air forces, all intent on hitting especially moving vehicles or stationary, a fuel supply column had been destroyed the 4th and another two the 5th.

The reality of the events now also dragged the commands to the highest level in the wake of the projected troops to retake Cyrenaica. On April 5 Gen. Guzzoni, examining with von Rintelen the evolution of operations in Libya, noted that the situation was favorable indeed because the British were to have withdrawn many forces, and recognized the opportunity to leave the controls in place the decision on further developments. At the same time, in an interview held in Ajdabiya at 12:00 hours, Rommel was illustrating to the features of Gariboldi already in place: the main action with ground forces, on the Ajdabiya-Derna-Mechili; Sub-action of mopping up along the coast; aerial action along the via Balbia and on areas of possible embarkation. Admitted to be going through a period of crisis of the supplies but also confided to retake Cyrenaica in the next couple of days. Or, at least, to encircle British forces stationed there and then destroyed in the following days. Then stated their intentions in the following directives: start the 5th Light and *Ariete* to the Bomba - Ain el-Gazala area; carry out the sweep to Derna and make contact with the enemy at Tobruk; press from the West towards Derna with the *Brescia*, the *Trento* and the units of the 5th Light. Gariboldi shared the idea and, in relation to the particular difficulties that established on *Brescia*, who had units yet to Nofilia, more than 400 miles away, made sure that the Intendenza would have moved forward rapidly the necessary logistics supply bases of operations in harmony with the lengthening supply lines. Told that were already underway by others to re-use the port of Benghazi and placed at the disposal of Rommel a share of the *Trento* already poised to Misurata (the 61st infantry and the I/46th artillery).

Meanwhile, in the middle of the desert, in the storm of *ghibli* which rendered extremely painful movement and observation, it happened in a slow and hard to advance the Santamaria group, the Schwerin group, the Fabris column ⁽³¹⁾ and Mamman column ⁽³²⁾. At 18:00, shortly after Bir Ben Gania, the march became very hard for

guidance fix, overheating of the motors, fuel shortages, disruption of radio communications. They met the first minefields, but at least during the day were easily detectable because the British retreat in haste, had neglected to remove the signs. Rommel, who was flying on a Storch to better follow the situation, landed near the edge. He listened without flinching heartaches that struggled, ordered to supply more efficient means with all the fuel available, abandoning others in the desert, resume the advance to Bir Tengeder, aim at Mechili resulting vacates and circumvent the Fort from the East towards Derna in the early hours of the next day. Rimessisi on the move, at midnight the Santamaria group (four halves and two pieces) and Schwerin group (about half) are arrested while waiting for dawn.

Twelve hours earlier, as soon as the Mamman column had in turn left direct to Ajdabiya Giof el-Matar, Rommel had ordered Col. Olbrich heading on Msus, annihilate opponents element reported there and continue to Mechili. Olbrich had almost all of the 5th *Panzer* Regiment and the VII Battalion M 13 ⁽³³⁾. Leaving the via Balbia, the tanks ventured eastward. Could not find obstacles: Msus, reached in the evening, had already been abandoned by the 6th *Royal Tanks*.

Neame was receiving conflicting news on the enemy. Didn't think the Director Ajdabiya - Bir Ben Gania - Bir Tengeder - Gulf of Bomba: his major concern - arising from the reports supplied - regarding the *gebel*. It seemed that a large enemy column was marching «East» el-Abiar and this induced him to decide on the withdrawal of the entire 9th Australian on Wadi Cuf, more or less the height of Cyrene. Later, however, having reason to believe that the column -was not mentioned Italian - German, rescinded the order. It was a miserable afterthought: the countermand came to Gen. Morshead when retrograde movement was begun and the return of just leave positions East of Barce was painful, because in the middle of the night.

At first light on the 6th even the bulk of the *Ariete* Division is put in motion ⁽³⁴⁾ following the Olbrich. Had to take the coast road until Suluq, then take Sceleidima and here stand waiting to leave for Mechili.

In the morning aerial exploration ascertained the presence at Mechili by troops in field fortifications and about 200 vehicles and British units in retreat toward the East. If you wanted to find “*the nest empty*” it was necessary to accelerate the pace. Rommel, who overnight had reached by car the head of the 5th Light about ten kilometres from Bir Tengeder, did not hesitate. Began to address immediately the 8th machine-gun Battalion on Derna, turning shafts of Mechili, to block the coast road towards “*East and West*”, which is not very easy because the Lt. Col. Ponath had when just a fifteen means. Then came the Santamaria group, the most advanced of the column, and ordered him to proceed with greater speed possible, go east of the Fort and strike a violent, sudden blow against British elements assembled thereon and their 150-200 vehicles. Santamaria made sure that would attack. He left immediately and at 10:00 arrived at the goal. Here he noticed that it was a decent texture and presidio of several hundred vehicles. Examined the situation, Santamaria had put the two pieces from 75 available in place about a kilometer from the village, then, made with two machine-gun platoons a wide turn to the East, attacked a straight blow. Were at 11:00. Arrived at two hundred meters, the Group was welcomed by a deadly fire. Fallen all officers, dead or wounded, halved the troop force, survivors found shelter on the section of the artillery. And very difficult to not believe sudden and untimely this action claim by Rommel, especially where it lay in comparison with what is narrated by Gen. Streich. According to the testimony of this man, at 8:00 Rommel had summoned the Commander of the 5th Light and the Lt. Col. Schwerin. It was a very tense conversation. To invest Mechili at 15:00, Streich offered a rejection *sic et simpliciter*: the Division was scattered throughout Western Cyrenaica by scattered in groups for mechanical failures or lack of fuel and was not even able to collect. Rommel reacted so harshly as to cause a resentful stance of Streich, then cut off the meeting ⁽³⁵⁾.

El-Mechili was the main caravan trade across the Cyrenaica. Around the old Fort, the 10th army had once built some kind of entrenched camp, about four kilometers of perimeter, with numerous workstations for machine guns and anti-tank pieces. On the eastern side, taking advantage of the bed the little take the *Wadi* er- Rambí, there was a long anti-tank ditch a few

hundreds of meters. There were also two airfields: one to the West of the Fort, the other at noon. The British had planted and preserved in a full-fledged logistics base and, given its importance, since 4 April there had come the 3rd Indian motor Brigade (less one Regiment) with three Anti Aircraft batteries. This complex of forces had evidently not struggling to repel the episode of the modest Santamaria Group, though the news of the episode persuaded O'Connor-Neame was temporarily absent because looking for Gambier-Parry the feared large flanking was in progress and that it was necessary to the overall withdraw.

Dispose method so that the support group of the 2nd Armored Division and the 3rd Armored Brigade began the retreat on Mechili. This time, however, there were setbacks. Gambier-Parry was already moving towards Mechili with the support group while Rimington learned of the order by the same O'Connor at Maraua, where he had gone to report on their conditions. Rimington had so little fuel that after some uncertainty resolved to take Maraua with the Brigade, hoping to find that source. So did, however gasoline remained at Maraua was absolutely insufficient. At this point he decided to go to Derna, where surely would have found the necessary. Wanted to precede the unit with the vice-commander to take timely contacts and gain time, but the car tipped over during the trip and the two generals, wounded, were later taken prisoner. The Brigade continued to withdraw as he and introduced in the columns of the 9th Australian Division, which in the meantime had provisions to retreat to el Gazala.

On *gebel* events had carried out favorably for too many of the axis, but not as hoped by Rommel. The Australian 9th began the retreat on el Gazala on the afternoon of the 6th. You dispose the rearguard in the motorized 1st battalion of the *King's Royal Rifle Corps*, who had just arrived from Egypt, with the task of implementing the largest possible number of demolitions to avoid engaging part of column of *Brescia*, which had occupied Barce. The 2/13th Australian battalion was sent in haste to Manuba, some 20 km southeast of Derna, to cover the provenances from Mechili. Dusk came recently when it saw a small column, which envisions attacking. It was in fact the Lt. Col. Ponath. Launched by great race towards Derna, he could reach the hilly area. just

kilometers from the airport at around 18:30. Unfortunately he had with him a force of insufficient strength and was unable to seal the via Balbia, the city exceeded the reliefs along the southern edge of the airport. Resigned to stay overnight in one of the Gorges in the East of the roadway, just watch over waiting for reinforcements. But if he could not block the road had the good fortune of a valuable catch.

During the night, despite a considerable intermingled of units, Gen. Morshead was able to bring the bulk of the Australian 9th out of the trap of Derna. At 4:30 the first elements of the 26th Brigade began to flock to Tmimi and achieved ultimately to a defense arraignment to protect the retrograde movement in general. To Tmimi came also the command of Cyrenaica by Gen. A. F. Harding. They expected to find in place Neame and O'Connor, both of whom had left Maraua at 20:00 by car; seeing is not worried and decided to continue on to Tobruk. His fears were more than justified. The two leaders had tried to go to Tmimi with a large round, but all of a sudden lost in the night and, taking the track to Derna, despite a patrol of Ponath falling captive.

On the morning of the 7th Lt. Col. Ponath decided to make an attempt on the airport, but subjected to a violent reaction of fire had to desist. On the other hand towards 11:00 his reinforcements arrived: an anti-tank platoon, a anti-aircraft platoon, two machine-gun platoons and a field howitzer. The new first attack appeared to grow favorably towards 15:00 was repelled by the remains of the 5th *Royal Tanks*, finally towards the 17:00 came to the airport and blocking the road. The enemy, despite having lost the last *cruisers*, succeeded in great part to escape the encirclement and the fighting that followed by the evening of the 7th in the afternoon of 8 April failed to prevent even the troops of Derna eluded him.

On the evening of the 7th enemy situation was as follows. The 9th Australian Division with two brigades and support group of the 2nd Armored Division, was settling in defense in the West of Tobruk with the left to Acroma. At Tobruk, the 24th Brigade already in place had joined the 18th Australian Brigade, sent by sea from Alexandria after the departure of the 7th Australian Division for Greece. At el-Adem, South of Tobruk, was located a small tactical complex to oversee the approaches from the South. At Mechili finally stood Gambier-Parry with the commander

of his Division, the 3rd Indian Brigade and various units. During the night he had to fall back on el-Adem. The Italian - German part from the dispersion of the units was always strong. The column of *Brescia*, which he had left in the morning Barce, was at the height of the village De Martino, about seventy kilometers west of Derna, while the Ponath group, as we know, blocked the city from the South. The Wechmar group was stopped about 50 kilometers south of Maraua and 70 from Mechili. The column of the *Ariete*, from Msus, had just embarked on the Bir Ben Gania. Later the 5th *Panzer* of Olbrich proceeded with difficulty towards the appointment of Mechili.

Here Rommel was in his impatience. Attack right away, as soon as possible and in any case, had become a fixed idea. Since noon on the 6th he stood on the southern airfield awaiting news of his tanks. When he learned that the Fabris column was at the junction of Tengeder, sent immediately to detect the Commander of III battalion riflemen and gave him to 15:00 arrangements for the deployment of the weapons. In truth, the column was reduced to little thing: a company for motorbikers, two 75/27 batteries, a company from 47/32 and two sections 20, of course all incomplete because of personnel and vehicles stayed on the desert track. At 17:00 came Streich with his advanced command (some cars, two trucks and two anti-aircraft pieces) and Schwerin. Now Rommel ordered Streich to attack Mechili within an hour or so to liquidate the match before 19:00, when the Sun was setting, laid information with Italian artillery support. Too much haste: fatigue of too many, the difficulty in making contact between units and the inability to deploy the batteries from 75 for absolute shortage of gasoline, meant that the attempt failed in the bud.

Overnight refueling was accomplished through means as available in the area, then, at the dawn of April 7, Rommel wanted to take a look more closely: there were "*countless enemies and vehicles with the telescope we could clearly see soldiers grouped here and there*"⁽³⁶⁾. The dispositions assumed during the morning was meant to close Mechili in a circle: to the North and Northeast the Schwerin to interdict the runways to Berta and Derna; to the East the Fabris, who had absorbed the remnants of Santamaria, to seal the track to Tmimi; West the headquarters troop of the 5th light close provenances from Benghazi. The only way still open was South, but from Bir

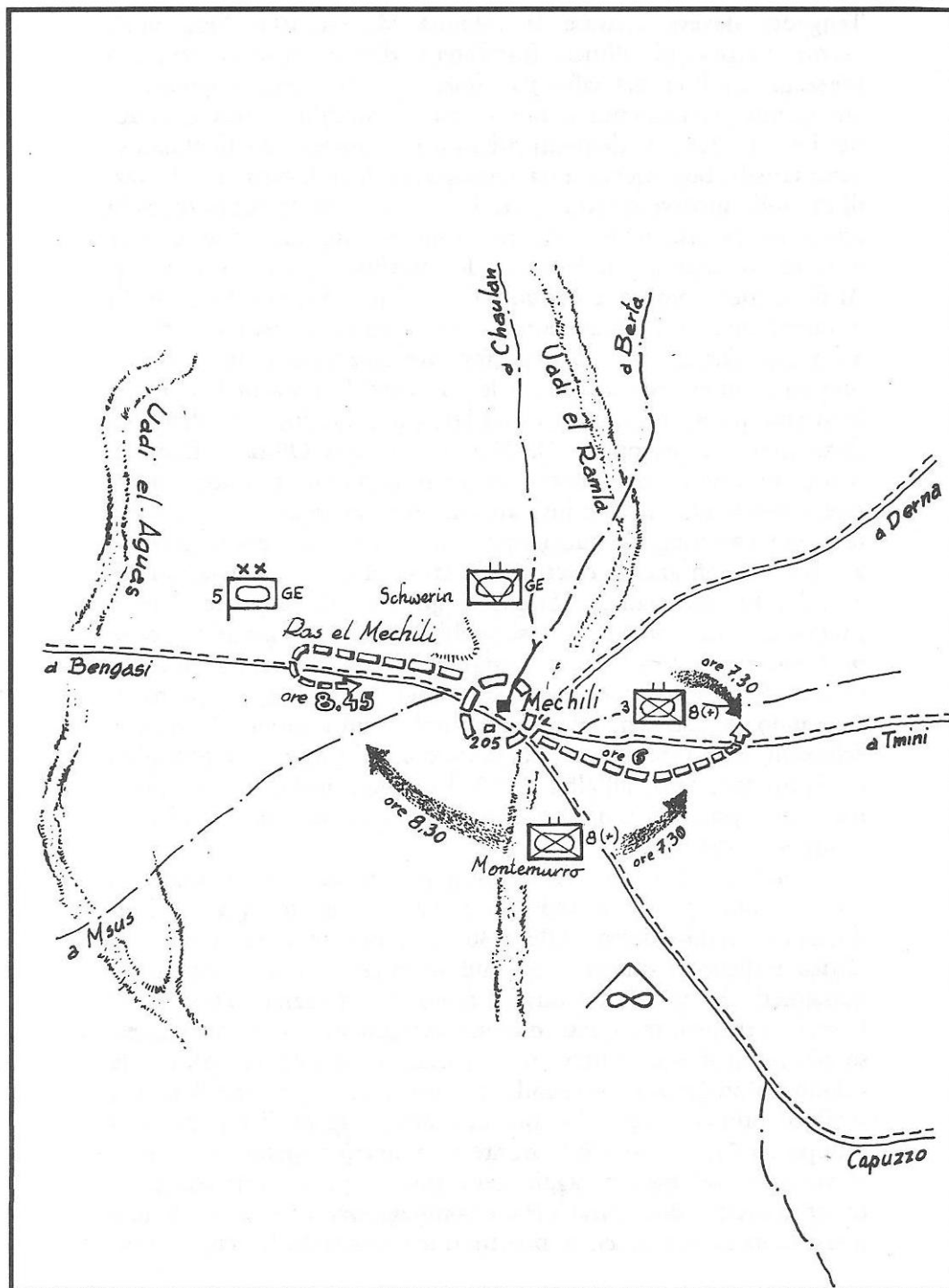
Tengeder had to get the column Mamman. Though nothing yet knew of Olbrich. Impatient of waiting, shortly before noon Rommel went on to make a *Storch* reconnaissance. A first sighting Northwest of Mechili manifested wrong because it was retreating British elements; but finally, to Ben Ghedir Ascher, fifty kilometers southwest of Mechili, tank formations appeared with German marks painfully stony desert Lycra. Rommel landed, had harsh criticism for slowness of movement and turned back. The Fort all seemed quiet, almost indifferent. Around 14:00 Rommel sent a negotiator to order the surrender "*in front of the entire German Africa Corps encircling Mechili*". The proposal was rejected. Towards 15:00 arrived the head of the Mamman column, also after leaving nearly two-thirds of its strength along the way⁽³⁷⁾. Always lacked, Olbrich. Rommel departed by plane, but only after sunset tracked the 5th *Panzerregiment*, which, still lost the orientation, it was lost. New landing, new bitter reproaches and new solicitations to proceed with great speed. Later, at the airfield of Mechili, Rommel called Streich and told him to take the Fort the next day. He was convinced that it would be "*another Canne in modern terms*". In the late evening kept the inflow of units. Four Panzer and six armored cars went to join the command of Streich, other armored cars reinforced the Schwerin Group, two or three platoons reached the XII *Bersaglieri* battalion. All in all, the dawn's circle, although not very strong, concretely realized appeared around Mechili (sketch No. 16).

The beginning of the attack was set for 7:30 hours. Overnight some; Indian patrols had tested here and there the Italy-German positions. At 5:30, suddenly, a Indian tactical complex headed south by running over the XII *Bersaglieri* battalion. Welcomed by a large fire, the formation abandoned the pass and retired, but almost simultaneously another enemy group had infiltrated the space between the Fabris column and the Mamman column, bending North to take the first from behind. The attempt ended in a short span of time. The II 75/27 group overthrew the front and began to shoot at close range, to it all the pieces were anti-tank. To three hundred meters the two *cruisers* that accompanied the attack were put out of action, while two sides counterattacked,

The fighting in el-Mechili (April 18, 1941)

I COMBATTIMENTI DI EL-MECHILI
(8 APRILE 1941)

Schizzo n. 16



carried by a platoon of the III Bersaglieri bn. in the North and a small tactical Group sent by the XII battalion South and panned each additional enemy ambitions. Then, it was about 7:00, since even an attempted northward had been rejected by the Schwerin, a large Indian column, with a squadron of the 18th cavalry in the led, turned against the command of the 5th Light, to the West. But faced with the reaction of German armored cars and tanks were forced to withdraw also. In the meantime, according to the orders given by Streich, Col. Malpas left the position held until then and moves toward the target assigned to him: Ras el-Mechili, Northwest of the Fort.

The intent was to strengthen the Northern circle, leaving green light, to the South, to the 5th *Panzerregiment*. The XII Bersaglieri had come a couple of kilometers under British fire, when he crossed the Indian education, rejected by Streich, came back to the Fort. Immediately all pieces available lined up and opened fire. All of a sudden the opposing resistance ceased and rose white drapes everywhere. Gen. Gambier-Parry surrendered to Col. Malpass and with him surrendered Gen. Vaughan, Commander of the 3rd Indian Brigade. Soon after came the Group Schwerin, very appropriately because the capture material and covers approximately 1,700 prisoners and 500 vehicles was fairly complex undertaking for three hundred men of Malpas. Italian losses amounted, in total, to 22 dead, 52 injured and 19 missing.

Rommel, after yet another flight in search of Olbrich, was landed at his tactical Command from where he was distributed by car towards Mechili. Surprised by a violent sand storm, could reach the airfield and then to the Fort when the fighting had ended. Towards noon he received from Lt. Col. Ponath news that at Derna the spoils and the number of prisoners was increasing from hour to hour; It was a situation that he could hardly cope with the actual order of your units and that necessitated the immediate sending of reinforcements. Almost at the same time the column of *Brescia* with the Gen. Zambon and Gen. Kirchheim (liaison officer) reached the town and fielded on the East Ridge. Enemy attempts to force the pass, which have lasted throughout the afternoon, were rejected. Rommel had started immediately the Schwerin and then had followed. Towards evening arrived at Derna and Ponath reported

had captured about 800 prisoners, including Neame and O'Connor, and large quantities of weapons, vehicles and gasoline ⁽³⁸⁾.

While on these developments were advanced, the lagged behind due to lack of fuel or damage, were gradually restocked and returned to tighten conditions on the head of their respective columns. On the other hand, overcoming considerable difficulties, the Intendenza provided meanwhile to establish regular supply currents. The logistics problem was always a major concern for the Comando Superiore:

"I gave all available vehicles-wrote Rommel to Gariboldi - to motorize the units of the *Brescia* Division, to complete the *Trento* and the 2nd horse artillery regiment. Every effort is made to give these units the autonomy necessary for food and logistics new supply bases.

To obtain these results I removed all, I say all, vehicles to units of the XXth and Xth Corps and, in consequence, no longer have any ability to move.

Therefore, until reinforced, vehicles will not be possible to move other units from Tripolitania to the forehead.

Live welcome as you did" ⁽³⁹⁾.

Is explicit reference to the reality of things and theoretically also appears justified. However, undeniably, if Rommel had followed the prescribed precautions he would have been to el Agheila or, at most, in Marsa el-Brega.

Basically, the Italian-German advance until Derna and Mechili and, for sure, it will be after-resulted in a hopeless trudging of heads of columns in an exhausting match against an equally desperate enemy rates decrease. But while the attackers were literally driven by an iron will to a leader tough on well-defined and clear objectives at all, folding groups moved without a guide, on the basis of firm orders frequently modified, in an environment of disorder relative next to what had led the remains of the Xth army, Tellera as at Beda Fomm. Had not all perverse Rommel to argue that the speed was operating on any other consideration prize. To part the fact that Napoleon was convinced advocate of this view, controls opponents never had time to deal with situations which in turn pressing German-Italian created.

The comment by Rommel is profoundly enlightening on his way of thinking and his energy:

"in modern war had never been taken up then an offensive so unprepared. It demanded a lot from the commanders and troops, especially regarding the gifts of improvisation and part of the commanders were not able to achieve the objectives. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that some of them wanted to make unnecessary stops to refuel with comfort of ammunition, provide full of tanks and vehicles inspected even when an immediate attack offered the best chance of success ⁽⁴⁰⁾. To the Commander the only standard should be the time required to perform the operation. He must employ all the energy in the performance of the task assigned to him promptly. For the March on Mechili hadn't asked too, so much so that the commanders that faced the task with the initiative did. The energy of the Commander has often more of his intelligence. (...)

The offensive in Cyrenaica collected major experiences that formed the basis of the measures subsequently taken by me. I had asked very, much more quickly than you could expect from the ranks in accordance with common, so create unit of my size. Always will be that the requirements dictated by the common experience they bring barely to medium performance. You must then satisfy them under any circumstances " ⁽⁴¹⁾.

In fact was not content even in the first case. It was pretty clear the intention of Wavell to hold Tobruk, feeding it from the sea, so that it was a thorn in the side of the projected forces upon reaching the border with Egypt. Therefore it was necessary to attempt to take Tobruk before it was too reinforced.

The capture of el-Mechili was certainly due to the qualities of personal will and energy of Rommel. Success, therefore, the work attributed rightly, though probably some preliminary efforts could be spared the excessive troops disproportion between the consistency of meager vanguards and the task entrusted to them. This deserved recognition was extended almost automatically to German units, leaving in silence the 8th *Bersaglieri* and working with it units, which-as we have seen – were the real protagonists of the combat. True it is that the whirlwind of events unfold and the intermingling of the units were at first ignore the good behavior of the columns Montemurro, Fabris and Santamaria under Italian Commands, starting from that of the *Ariete*. And it is also proper to point out that a few days later, Rommel was sent to Col. Montemurro, Commander of the 8th *Bersaglieri*, the iron cross 2nd class for the fact of arms: the first German reward the value granted to an Italian in North Africa.

For Italian troops in Libya the capture of el-Mechili meant so much. For those belonging to the divisions under Rommel's

or intended to get here was a source of pride, of rejoicing, of trust; for all other remain in Tripolitania such feelings were clouded by a sense of frustration. It was the troops escaped Beda Fomm or who had witnessed the painful reflux of the remains of the 10th Army, with just enough vehicles to ordinary supplies, related to a *routine* life, incomplete and even barely able to carry out a fruitful training, have mostly come in holes dug in the desert. They were men of very high morale, which they felt of second order because it cut off from the victorious operations who see from afar motorized and armored columns pass through day and night on via Balbia constituted serious confrontation with their lives by “walking infantry”, which was indicated by official rhetoric as the Queen of the battles but from other weapons was called *la buffa*.

3. THE REACHING OF SOLLUM (3rd PHASE).

On the morning of 9 April, the aerial reconnaissance reported that the area west of the meridian of Tmimi had been vacated by the enemy and that Tobruk appeared the concentration point of retreating British troops. Around midday, Rommel gave new orders: the *Brescia* was expected to proceed along the via Balbia with units available and attack Tobruk from the West while the 5th Light would invest the fort of el-Adem. As for the two Italian mechanized divisions, the *Ariete*, stopped with the bulk in the area of Bir Tengeder, just had to go to supplied Gazala and *Trento*, in part already arrived at Ajdabiya, should accelerate the movement and reach the *Brescia*. However, if the Vanguards were marching to recover better from el- Mechili and Derna for the big speech changed. The *Brescia* was scattered from Derna to Benghazi and the columns both met difficulty for lack of fuel. The 5th Light Division, however, had the 5th *Panzerregiment* stop at Mechili, intent to disassemble, clean and reassemble the jamming turrets of tanks for the sand. So the Commander of the *Afrikakorps*, when (at 18:30) knew that the regiment wasn't even party, invested again on Gen. Streich, despite having himself, personally authorized the maintenance of the tanks. Very unhappy, Rommel took then a decision much

questionable under more than one aspect. Took advantage of the visit of Gen. Heinrich von Prittwitz, Commander of the 15th Panzer Division, just landed in Libya with the earliest units to align his summarily and give him the command of advanced elements of the 5th Light: the 8th machine-gun battalion of Ponath, the Recon Group of Wechmar and *Panzerjaeger* group of Schwerin. Then, in the early hours of 10 April, sailed for Tobruk. His assessment, reported in the war diary of the *Afrikakorps*, was devoid of doubt: "*I am convinced that the enemy is retreating and we must pursue with all available forces. Every soldier should know that our goal is the Suez Canal. You must surround by every means the fortress of Tobruk to prevent any enemy sortie*". The first move was not happy. Eighteen kilometers from town, Ponath entered the radius of the British artillery was still barely a couple of miles and then stopped permanently. Earlier von Prittwitz had reached Lt. Col. Schwerin and was trying to get an idea of the terrain and the troops: it was clearly disorientated and confused. While lingered, Rommel, came that curtly asked why the action had stopped. Von Prittwitz, confused, did give the car to Schwerin and sailed towards Tobruk. I noticed the machine Gunners at kilometer 16, I heard their cries of incident. Almost immediately an enemy anti-tank grenade picked up the car, killing strike the general and the driver⁽⁴²⁾.

Maybe at first Rommel had found that Australians were willing to embark, repeating the evacuation of Dunkirk. Sure thought a defense of the fort just sketched. On April 10 and 11 were used for the investment of Tobruk, more through a series of bets or offensive reconnaissance according to a methodical plan. However on the evening of the 11th the *Brescia* faced the Western defenses of the city and the 5th Light the South and Southeast sides. Of course both divisions had only an share of its units, the remainder had yet to arrive or had continued toward the frontier. In late afternoon, the 5th *Panzerregiment* and the 8th machine-gun Battalion had made an attempt to attack, but had failed. The twenty available tanks had moved at 16:45 and thereupon was exposed the Ponath battalion. The progression under fire Australian was slow, then suddenly the *Panzer* made a u-turn and withdrew to

full speed under an intense barrage fire: the sudden sighting of a wide and deep ditch, apparently not surmountable, had induced the tankers to abandon the action.

The various echelons of the *Ariete*, replenished at Mechili by three Junkers transports, reached the area of el-Adem between the evening of 12 and 13 afternoon, Easter day. An hour after the arrival of the Division Command, Rommel ordered that the Montemurro column moved to the Egyptian border: “*March to the East for six miles, then converge towards the North until you reach the via Balbia and continue on to Bardia*”. At 10:00 the next day, suffered a couple of air raids, the column reached the border town by joining the 3rd recon group, before whom the British had withdrawn to Halfaya pass without reacting. The “fort” was cluttered of wrecks of the battles of January. On 15 and 16 January came in other units and Col. von Herff assumed command of Bardia-replacing Campbell ⁽⁴³⁾.

In fourteen days had been traveled 1,000 kilometers and captured 2,500 prisoners, including six generals ⁽⁴⁴⁾ and large quantity of material ⁽⁴⁵⁾.

Reaching the frontier, Rommel believed that the enemy does not have troops ready to such an extent that they can combat the penetration into Egypt and informed the Comando Superiore of his intention to continue with the advanced Vanguard eastward to beat then British reserves as they were presented. Don't just make sure of the supplies, the bulk of the units should follow immediately. The indispensable and urgent measures to be taken concerning the timeliness of logistical support to the Italian divisions; the influx accelerated at the *Deutsches Afikakorps* of all Italian motorized forces still available; the occupation of Cyrenaica and rear control by other Italian units; the safe connection with the Comando Superiore and the commands of the Italian divisions; the aerial supply to the avant-garde; coastal security with full use of R. Marina; monitoring of the Mediterranean Fleet. Gen. Calvi di Bergolo, connecting at the DAK, held to inform that Rommel was oriented to continue operations to reach Marsa Matruh with kept the same pace up to that point, in the certainty that the enemy had already vacated the entire Egypt up to the Canal Zone.

During the meteoric reconquest of Cyrenaica axis High Command had followed the astounding with disparate thoughts. Surprised, at first, that could translate into a risky adventure, to swallow even the precious *Afrikakorps*, had ended up getting in the spirit of initiative of Rommel, although according to an underlying caution.

In Rome the Comando Supremo considered more than favorably the situation ⁽⁴⁶⁾. Given that Wavell had seemed stolen from considerable forces from Cyrenaica and Egypt to form a Balkan front, to reinforce the garrison of Palestine and feed the action for the conquest of Eastern Africa. This would probably lead to take the deployment leaned Marsa Matruh, already adopted at the time of Graziani's advance. According to the S.I.M. the available forces were the following:

between Salum and Tobruk: two Indian divisions,
in the Delta: three British divisions (with two brigades), three Australian and a New Zealand divisions, two Indian divisions (with two brigades),
on the Canal: a British Division, a Australian Division.

Taking this assessment for good (not shared by the Germans, that there were four to five divisions in the Delta and one on Canal) was no doubt that one way or another--by withdrawing troops from Palestine or from Greece, given the failure of the planned Macedonian front, or making them flow from the northern front of Eastern or Mrica: overseas-the opponent could overcome the crisis within two or three months and maybe less. It was necessary, therefore, to examine the possibility of taking advantage of the momentary weakness of the English "*to dare to go on Alessandna and on to the Canal*". The experience of the offensive by O'Connor and Rommel's counter-offensive taught that in that theater of operations needed armored and motorized forces and adequate logistic organization. In Libya were the *5th leichte Division*, the *Ariete* and the *Brescia* (partially motorized) and by the first half of may were completed in Tripoli landings of *15th Panzerdivzsion* and *Trent* motorized Division. Then it was necessary at all costs to be transported in North Africa in that same period of time the food logistics support of five divisions and the 5th Air Fleet; subject, the *Trieste* motorized Division or vehicles to motorize

the divisions already in Libya. The difficulties related to this program: but it seemed insurmountable, particularly bearing in mind the purpose: it was necessary to improve the chances of-discharge of Tripoli and, above all, also use the ports of Cyrenaica.

The General Staff was beyond R. Army in perspectives. In its view it was necessary to send at least another motorized Division, apart from the *Trieste*, and of large automobiles, for Comando Superiore, by retrieving all motorized units not strictly necessary in Italy and invoking where appropriate German co-operation. Then expected timing:-as soon as possible reach Halfaya pass;

-by 15-20 may prepare the base to the Egyptian border.

-no later than 30 May begin the offensive, with the possibility to reach the goal before the end of June or the first fortnight of July, i.e. before the large summer warm.

All this, however, as is apparent from two almost simultaneous notes, it was the thought of the offices of the Comando Supremo and operations staff of the R. Army. Guzzoni was not at all the view of encouraging Rommel in his long-range designs, which, in this area, encouraging was the last thing Rommel needed. Therefore signed a dispatch sent by Mussolini to Gariboldi a directive imposing a stopping time:

“Logistical difficulties & consequent wear vastness & rapidity that we have conducted operations to Bardia and perhaps impose at Sollum Hold time for reorganizing units and supplies. It is also necessary for future operations that are heavily engaged troops reinforcements. It is not possible to intervene immediately with sea actions beyond those treacherous means that wherever possible you will reinforce.

The German Air Corps cannot for a period of time be certain distracted from its duties designed to eliminate as soon as possible English and Greek defenses on Greek territory. We will compensate for the reduction of the C.A.T. aircraft with sending Italian aircraft, to the extent permitted by the preparation of the bases.

As you know, the offenses for sea and sky on channel of Sicily for part of the English seem to intensify and this requires greater distraction from other tasks of naval and air transportation for our convoys stocks. In this situation it would be too dangerous to continue the advance beyond Sollum before having sufficient preparation. What I care about, rather than a further advance along the coast road, is the occupation of the oases of Giarabub and Siwa oasis. ⁽⁴⁷⁾.

The dispatch came to a superior Commander more than convinced of the appropriateness of an operational pause. He then hastened to order Rommel to provide first to choose a location to which anchor, waiting to have sufficient forces and organized enough to take the offensive, and to orient the reoccupation of Giarabub.

The day after the failed attempt to eliminate with a quick attack the "thorn in the side of Tobruk", Rommel spontaneously changed his orientation. He represented the OKW that he could not predict when he would be able to bring a new decisive attack on Tobruk, as subordinate to the arrival of new forces and claimed to have to temporarily abandon the further advanced into Egypt "*despite the unparalleled opportunity offered by the overall situation*".

The thought of the Italian Comando Supremo, concentrated on the conclusion of the war with Greece, was fully shared by the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*, who, on the eve of the attack on the Soviet Union, had no intention of further engage in the Mediterranean. Halder also commented in his diary: "*now [Rommel] is finally forced to admit that his forces are not sufficient (...). An impression that here we have a shot.*" In an interview which took place in Rome on the evening of the 14, von Rintelen, who had been given a copy of a telegram in which it recommended a pause in Libya, said that he had learned from the Gen. Jodi that the Fuhrer was basically of the same opinion as the Duce: need a break to organize supplies and reinforcements to arrive. Break though minimized possible-a couple of weeks-to deny the British the time to change the circumstances in its favor. According to Hitler a postponement of the offensive to autumn upturn would be overkill. Von Rintelen clarified also that the destination of Marsa Matruh was indicated by Rommel only as lens for observation units. The next day the same von Rintelen handed him a document reflecting the thoughts of the OKW on the situation. First of all it was explicitly insured that the Fuhrer and the OKW agreed in full with the Italian Comando Supremo about the indispensability of a stop. Secondly, the premises were suitable "*to avoid a failure*" in the offensive towards the Suez Canal: influx of ground reinforcements (15th Panzer and large Italian units) from the motherland and aircraft (three or four groups of various kinds) provided by X *Fltegerkorps*; broadening the basis of departure

to start with the occupation of the oases of Giarabub and Siwa oasis to the exposed flank protection; establishment of a strong logistic base in Cyrenaica, able to satisfy the needs of both the Army aviation; Elimination of any British interference against the backline. This last point was the capture of Tobruk, coastal protection and coastal navigation, protecting convoys from Italy. The memo is closed with a clarification: "*the expected phase does not exclude, however, advanced reconnaissance units (units exploring) towards the East, I aim to clarify the situation and to prevent the construction of a English defensive front*"⁽⁴⁸⁾.

In essence they all agree: Mussolini and Hitler, Comando Supremo and OKW, Gariboldi and Rommel.

On the evening of April 3, just in London arrived the news that Benghazi had to be abandoned, that the 7th Australian Division could no longer be transferred to Greece because its presence was indispensable in Cyrenaica, the 6th Division, although incomplete, became the reserve and that the conquest of Rhodes was postponed, Churchill immediately telegraphed Eden, who was still in Athens. It was a very controversial telegram in form and content. The confused and alarmed inquiry, he accompanied the Chief immediately offering: Wavell.

"The eviction of Benghazi-he wrote-is a serious matter, since the Germans, once settled at airports around, there will probably be useful to Tobruk. Discover what is strategic and tactical plan to defeat the enemy. Let me know up to what point was ordered to fall back. How and where withdraw of the 9th Australian Division? Remember that in his telegram of 2 March Wavell gave me some peremptory argument to believe the security of his western flank (...)"⁽⁴⁹⁾.

Eden responded a few days later from Cairo. Together with the Gen. Dill, had talked to the commanders in Chief of the Middle East and all agreed that the Rommel's counter-offensive as a diversionary maneuver, intended to promote the imminent attack of Germany to Greece. Of course this unabated concerns for Egypt, saw there was to be expected partly from opposing the exploitation at the bottom of any success.

The first dispatch arrived in Cairo on the morning of 6 April-

shortly after the start of the operation *Marita* in Balcania- was the Chief of staff: recognized priority one to re-establishment of the front in the Western desert; the 7th Australian Division thus wouldn't match and the invasion of the Dodecanese was postponed. They also announced strong reinforcements of tanks and for 10 June, an armored brigade equipped with Matilda, sent with a fast convoy. Remembered that in Eastern Mrica there were South African and Indian divisions usable and, meanwhile, suggested the use of commandos in the enemy's rear and lines of communication. As for the other two armed forces, the first reinforcements consisted of 5 destroyers from the Indian Ocean and 2 submarines from the Western Mediterranean and 30 *Wellington* bombers for the Western desert and 6 *Beaufort* for Malta. In that afternoon, in a plenary meeting, the commanders in Chief examined the situation. Were all agreed on the need to stabilize the battle and that, probably, the best card to play consisted of Tobruk, where, among other things, had been massed stocks of food, water and various materials for several months. The major concern for Wavell concerning the armor: to stop Rommel needed many *cruisers* and possibly *Matilda* and anti-aircraft and anti-tank cannons, and specialists for repairs to armored vehicles. Considering getting a more or less short term as needed, the basic problem concerned Tobruk: keep it or not? All in all, Wavell was oriented to defend it if possible (the 18th Australian Brigade was already en route by sea transfer); to be attested at the border to carry out a threat against the siege of the city (the 22nd guards Brigade, two squadrons of 11th Hussars and a companion were artillery regiment marching towards Bardia), and to restore the old defensive plan leaned Marsa Matruha Egypt's security. Longmore expressed its intention to re-open the Airport East of Marsa Matruh and focus the largest number of aircraft along the supply route to Takoradi-while taking into account other existing commitments in the theatre of operations in order to intervene on the Italian -German mechanized columns. Cunningham said, meanwhile, that he had confidence in the ability of the *Mediterranean Fleet* to ensure supplies by sea to Tobruk. Despite the opposing aviation and naval attack.

Wavell was comforted by such considerations, however, before taking a decision to make in person the

conditions at the entrenched camp and I went flying with Gen. J.D. Lavarack, Commander of the 7th Australian Division. As he arrived, gave to these interim command of British forces in Cyrenaica ⁽⁵⁰⁾ with the task to curb the advance of Rommel to Tobruk, thus giving time to the arrival of reinforcements into Egypt. He noted with pleasure the calm and decisiveness of Morshead and examined with him the local defense. More or less reflected the problems that were presented in January by Gen. Pitassi Mannella: perimeter belt too wide for the troops available; not particularly relevant anti-tank obstacle; many trenches to recover because it covered with sand. There were however some *Matilda*, who could repeat the invaluable role played in his time, and Wavell ordered were shipped to Alexandria, via sea, others selected from among those reconditioned tanks and less old. In the afternoon returned to Cairo with an adventurous journey ⁽⁵¹⁾ and found another message of Churchill:

"you should certainly be able to hold Tobruk with its permanent defenses built by the Italians, at least until or if the enemy does not lead to large artillery force line (...)" ⁽⁵²⁾

Wavell responded by stroking a big picture of the theater and observing that, although Rommel's first effort seemed to have run out of course, felt that the truce would not be long. This a little worried, as Tobruk was not a good defensive position and terrestrial communication line was helpless and not organized. That replica stirred up many doubts about its real meaning and alarmed Churchill that he prepared a hot telegram ⁽⁵³⁾. The return to London to Eden and Gen. Dill with definitive decisions of Wavell and the opinion of Cunningham and Longmore, did replace the dispatch with another hearty approval.

At Tobruk, Morshead was firmly determined to stand up to his opponent. When the fort was invested he calculated to be 36,000 in attendance, including also some hundreds of prisoners. "*There will be another Dunkirk-told his commanders in suborder-If we get out of here, we will open the street fighting. Here there is neither surrender nor retreat!*" ⁽⁵⁴⁾. on balance, had four Australian infantry brigades, four campaign artillery regiments with 25-pound pieces, two anti-tank regiments, the 4th anti-aircraft artillery brigade with 16 heavy and 59 light pieces, had also hastily put back on. its

feet the 3rd Armored Brigade with 26 *cruisers*, 15 light tanks and 4 *Matilda*. In due course, when begin attacks on the stronghold, we will calculate the balance of power.

You should also mention on the air force. The turning part by the R. Aeronautics was intense but troubled because departing the organization still suffered the effects of the retreat in Tripolitania. This part, certainly couldn't accuse the inconveniences of an advanced so rapidly and so abnormal. The availability of equipment was limited, but there were objective difficulties for its substantial increase. The April 9 on Gen. Pricolo replied to one of the many reminders of the Comando Supremo, declaring again the inability to increase aerial forces in Libya until the arrival of aerodrome equipment, ready in Italy a month and currently still traveling, had not made it possible to prepare the necessary bases. The past experience required that departments were only dispersed aircraft on a suitably equipped, such as to ensure efficiency and use. "*And known to this Stamage-continued the head of General Staff of the Air Force-that for over a month the 8th Stormo da bombardamento expects to be able to move in and to the A.S.I only one group could be sent these days, as the fifth Air Force has the inability to provide for the accommodation of the entire wing (...)*" ⁽⁵⁵⁾.

In mid-April Gen. Aimone-Cat sent a lengthy report to the S.M.R. to, in which he highlights the difficulties that the fifth Air Force had found to follow the progression of large ground units. While the German air force had not encountered serious setbacks, thanks to higher logistical organization, the Italians were forced to suffer the negative effects of the lack of vehicles, transport aircraft and materials for the airports. After the occupation of Benghazi things had improved. The fifth Air Force had, in fact, immediately established an advanced Command with two fighter groups, one bomber, one squadron of *Stuka* and strategic reconnaissance units at Benghazi airport first and later at Derna. However, the logistical problem remained a foot ball and had given rise to problems:

"The troops, especially Italians, have, during our advanced in good part could be supplied to the contribution given by the air force or removed it without notice, nor quote it later.

For the advance of the *Ariete* Division, for example, was absorbed of total authority all fuels (80 t c.) of the En Nofilia depot, prepared by us with great difficulty and urgency for our logistics trucking.

No objection if these urgent procedures were harmonized with all other operations including air, which is increasingly ready to ask and expect to grant. But this is not always the case.

For example, to get the return of 30 vehicles stolen at the time by the Sahara aviation and it needed, has lost a lot of precious time and it is expected that aviation was the water in the throat for supply deficiency. On the other hand, on a simple request for more of C.A.T. (to which we had been refused the loan of 20 vehicles, not having enough even for us), the Comando Superiore has granted 80 vehicles, now that the C.A.T. continues to employ. Then, having had to provide the urgent supply of ammunition to our rapid artillery regiment, it had to rely on air transport (...).

The logistics situation is undoubtedly complicated and difficult, nor is it to think that we could resolve only with a more prudent use of 80 vehicles supplied or with respect to a fuel depot of the air force. But, precisely for these reasons, it is more than ever necessary in one direction only, predictive; shrewd and determined, which would link the problem to logistic operations, maintaining the harmony of proportions (...)”⁽⁵⁶⁾.

This complex of reasons had not allowed the 5th Air Force as spectacular action as that of ground troops.

Undoubtedly hurt her career the improvisational character that marked the reconquest of Cyrenaica, however probably was lacking that centralization, which alone can offer really convincing results. We must also remember that the *Fliegerfuhrer Afrika* was not under the command of Rommel, but cooperated with him. Despite the large number of interventions were decisive attacks failed on a few lines of retreat of the enemy and no RAID was carried out on airports in the enemy hands, except for the one on Derna, however ineffective. As was noted by the British, enemy losses due to air raids were light. The British counted on two fighter squadrons (No. 3 and no. 73), one bomber (No. 55th) and one for cooperation with the Army (No. 6). All in all, none of the two opposing air forces was strong enough to conquer the air supremacy, but maybe some opportunity was lost by that of the axis.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

- (1) For details see order of battle ground forces, appendix 2 and air force, appendix 3 on the date of 1.4. 1941.
 - (2) The *Brescia* Inf. Div. belonged to X Corps, but by March 17 it was employed for temporary use of the DAK.
 - (3) At the end of the campaign of France, the Germans carried out a series of experiments on captured armored vehicles, especially British ones. Were affected by the front armor of the *Matilda II* (78 mm), that major distances could be pierced only by 88 mm anti-aircraft gun.
- Based on the data of experience acquired, the OKW decided promptly to replace the 37 mm piece of the pzkw III with a short 50 gun and increase the armor of the pzkw III and IV with additional plates of 33 mm, hardened to resist armor-piercing 2-pounder piece, i.e. of 40 mm, which arm the *cruisers* and the *Matilda* at any distance, except comparatively close.
- Incidentally, the use of additional plates to increase and even double the armor was useful for the current model, as it does not affect the production, and also for old but still in service,
- (4) You cannot provide absolute elements on a bullet to pierce armor in combat, being many factors that come into play. Calculations and experiments can, therefore, only give approximate indications. Each tank's armor varies in thickness and inclination from place to place and, in addition, armored plates, itself differentiated by quality and hardness, have very dissimilar welding systems
 - (5) To the DAK was allocated interception No. 3/N 56. From 6 March to April operated a single platoon. On 24 April landed at Tripoli with the bulk of the company, that on 2 May he compiled his first report.
 - (6) HANS-OTTO BEHRENDT, op. cited above, p. 99.
 - (7) The trick of Gunners processing at full speed carrying behind them bush that raised a huge fuss was also thinking about the intervention of a large armored force.
 - (8) E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 23.
 - (9) The testimony of Gen. Streich reported by d. Irving, op. cited above, p. 83. Also below you will refer to the text in question as taken from the reports of Streich
 - (10) The German Africa Corps.
 - (11) DSCSAS, f. 308/4.41 dated 1.4.1941 of DAK
 - (12) D. IRVING, op. cited above, p. 85.
 - (13) J. CONNEU., op. cited above, pp. 391-392.
 - (14) *Ibid.* It is not clear the reference is to three brigades: If meant the support group, the 3rd Brigade Arm. and the 3rd Indian motor Brigade in influx or if it was referring to the 3rd Armored and two Australian brigades which Neame had at the time

- (15) I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 21.
- (16) Neame was tense and some had to give heart to his own mood. In its report dated May 27, 1941 he thus expressed: "*the transfer of the 2nd Armored Division (less the 3rd Armored Brigade) to the West of the Sceleidima-el Regima line had not been provided nor ordered by me. It caused difficulty for the motorized Division transport in crossing the Wadi South of el-Scheme. This transfer was resulting from orders issued by my command on the evening of April 2, when you are Commander in Chief was interposed, and another order issued, do not know if on the basis of instructions of the Commander in Chief, I am on 3 April by his boss of G.S., while I was with the Commander in Chief. A part of these orders was not consistent with the situation that was developing on the spot. The 3rd Brigade moved to Msus, not having been able to move the previous evening. The Commander in Chief kept me away from my command for all the criticism the morning of 3 April, while he visited in Benghazi the 9th Australian Division. The Germans were advancing on Benghazi along the coastal road without finding opposition (...).*"
- (17) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 236.
- (18) J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 395
- (19) E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, pp. 16-17
- (20) Made up by the III.btg. the Bers. motorcyclists, I/132nd 75/27 artillery, company 142nd 47/32 guns, two 20 sections, elements of engineers and services, under the command of Lt. Col. Fabris. Was initially reinforced by the Santamaria group.
- (21) The lines of Rommel (*op. cited*, p. 24) you get the sensation of an exaggerated statement and alarms made by Gen. Zambon. In reality was not so and the March on el-Mechili asw shown. But Zambon had referred to the Trigh el Abd, i.e. the track by el-Mater Giof Bir Tengeder-Mechili and not-Ajdabiya stroke-Giof el-Mater, that route personally by Rommel.
- (22) H.O. BEHREND, op. cited above, p. 86.
- (23) DSCSAS, tele/01 3283 op. dated 2.4.1941 of the Comando Superiore.
- (24) H.O. BEHREND op. cited above, p. 86.
- (25) D. IRVING, op. cited above, p. 87. .
- (26) A. VON TAYSEN, Tobruk 1941. *Der Kampf in Nordafrika*, Freiburg 1976, p. 82.
- (27) DSCSAS, tele dated 3.4.1941, 783 21.25 hours, Comando Supremo.
- (28) It was agreed to be a patrol of the *Long Range Desert Group* and recovery section of the 3rd Armored Brigade.
- (29) I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 22.
- (30) J. CONNELL., op. cited above, pp. 397-398.
- (31) The column Fabris had been overcome during the night by Schwerin.

- (32) Formed by the 8th Bersaglieri, XII btg. Bersaglieri truck transportable, a 75-27 battery, 72nd 47/32 company, a section of 20 mm., element of engineers and services.
 - (33) The battalion hastily set up in Italy, was sent to Libya with the engines without oil filter, without the necessary workup and with untrained personnel and tight-knit. 50 tanks will remain scattered along desert tracks. To Tobruk to come only 7
 - (34) The column consisted of the Division Command, V/8th Bersaglieri truck transportable, 32nd Armored Regiment with a truck transportable L3 tank battalion, 132nd artillery (less detached units), 132nd 47/32 company, elements of engineers and services.
 - (35) According to Streich, Rommel, irritated at the high rank for refusing, he shouted in his face that he was a coward, whereupon Streich, snatched the iron cross neck received in France, he retorted: "*no one has ever dared to call me such a thing! Please poi this in his report, or this throw at his feet.*" (D. IRVING, op. cited, p. 91).
 - (36) E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 30.
 - (37) Arrived in the late afternoon: elements of the 8th Bersaglieri Command elements of the XII Bersaglieri battalion Command, two platoons truck transportable, two machine-gun platoons, a company of 47/32, a 75/27 battery, two sections 37/45 and two 20 mm sections.
 - (38) Rommel had to mention the conquest of Mechili by-my-troops and the occupation of Derna for work-it would seem- of gen. Kirchheim which was intervened in force (op, cited above, pp. 34-35). Should be more accurate and objective and give to Caesar what is Caesar's.
- In this respect-to remove misconceptions arising from Rommel's statement-is entirely a personal letter sent on June 13, 1941 from Jan. Kirchheim to gen. Zambon: *«Dear Sir. General, yesterday I was informed that the German radio had recalled that the General or the command of Gen. Kirchheim had first entered Derna with their division. I will inform the institution responsible for this communication that you were the Division Commander and I only the liaison officer. You know well, that behind the order of C.T.A., all communications relating to the 'Bresci ' Division were there transmitted in clear according to the «reference line». For this reason I had to call the column with the name of 'Adolfo' and column called by this term command of Gen. Kirchheim»* that's it.
- This happened because you wanted to believe another command of large unit commanded by a general, Though even there the corresponding radio, as provided by all data, one has been fooled. If You still feel you have some other step, please give me your courteous news. I will in any case everything possible to avoid a repeat of that mistake. Friendly greetings to you and your Division».*
- (39) DSCSAS, f./01 op. dated 9.4.1941 5091.
 - (40) Years later, reading *Krieg ohne Hass*, on Jan. Streich had to comment: "*it was always this sore point, the fact that Rommel's illusions were always short of gasoline. And was not the fault of any of his commanders, but hi and, on the sidelines of the observation of Rommel, noted: «what balordaggine!* (Guess "Bull Shit")" (D. IRVING, op. cited, p. 97).

(41) E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 35-37.

(42) Count von Schwerin recalled the episode in 1976: *«I saw red at that news. I started sitting right at the time of the famous white house where Rommel had set up his headquarters. Soon arrived and informed him that the General sent to the front was already dead. It was the first time that I saw something in a cloth bag. Turned pale and leave without saying a Word. »*

Also Streich remembered the story. The course looking for Rommel with war prize car, found a small group of vehicles South of Tobrok. Just joined him I leaped to the ground and shouted that von Prittwitz was dead. Interrupted by Rommel, who coldly remarked how he had taken the risk of falling under the fire of his machine gun because of British vehicle used, Streich had retorted: "so there would be out to kill the same day both of his division commanders, Herr General.» (D. IRVING, op. cited, p. 95).

(43) The forces in the sector were as follows. Italian: Command 8th bersaglieri, XII battalions. Bers., 2nd co. III motorcycle Bers Bn., 72nd 47/32 Gun co., III/62nd infantry. Trento, a 75/27 battery and a section of 20 mm from the 132nd artillery. German: 3rd Explo, group XV Bn, Fusiliers, 33rd group PanzerJaeger, and an 88 battery.

(44) The generals were: O'Connor, Commander of the British forces in Egypt; Neame, the Commander of Cyrenaica; Gambier-Parry, Commander of the 2nd Arm. Div.,; Rimington, Commander of the 3rd Arm. Bd.; Vaughan, Commander of the 3rd Indian Bd; Carton de Vian, crashed into the sea at Apollonia.

(45) From a first census, the materials of war booty scattered in the area between Agedabia and Benghazi amounted to 120 artillery pieces of various caliber, about 500 vehicles immobilized for faults and damage; 50 medium tanks in most part burned.

In this regard, before you even start the offensive, Rommel had asked that the enemy materials captured in common, those of British manufacture were considered German war booty and those already belonging to the tenth army returned to the Italians. Gariboldi agreed, but the agreement will give rise to recriminations and controversy, already at Mechili arose some discussion, because not all Italians were aware of the matter; However, many Italian soldiers, particularly suppliers of vehicles, considered appropriate to take the initiative and take out of unserviceable enemy vehicles everything that was still useable: low-pressure tires, equipment, map guides. etc

(46) We must mention even at some disappointment of Mussolini and the Comando Supremo: *«I pray you pass on more frequent complete news &-telegraphed Guzzoni to Gariboldi – because what we know about what is happening in Cyrenaica I we learn from Rommel's releases & English radio »*-(7915 tele/op. dated 6.4.41, hours 05), Gariboldi replied immediately: "Phenomenon complained that while it is explained Rommel communicates directly with Berlin, my Office when you can communicate and the same find general. I will do my best to improve communications»-(tele-op. 12 6.4 .41 dated, 15 hours).

(47) DSCS, tele 8196/Op, 13, dated 4.1941.

(48) The report of von Rintelen bears the date of April 15,

(49) W, CHURCHILL, op. cited, p. 238,

(50) Given the need to revise the command organization in the Middle East, Wavell appointed in those days the gen. A. Godwin-Austen Commander in Palestine, Gen. Marshall-Cornwall forces Commander in Egypt, Gen Noel Beresford-Peirse, Commander of forces in the Western desert.

- (51) Partly at dusk from Tobruk, the aircraft was forced to make a landing at night in the middle of the desert, a few miles from Sollum. Having smashed the aircraft, Wavell decides to remain where he was until dawn though, to good account, destroyed all the secret documents that he had. For his fortune a Sudanese patrol sent from Sollum, met the missing.
- (52) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 240.
- (53) The telegram was so conceived: *«we look forward to your opinion explicitly. Meanwhile, it's good that you know our views. Here, in the Middle, it seems inconceivable that we should abandon the fortress of Tobruk without giving the most stubborn resistance. We have a secure maritime communications line. The enemy's line is long and should be vulnerable unless you take the time to organize it at ease. Until Tobruk is in our hands and the garrison also has a number of armored vehicles that can attack the enemy's communications, these will not dare to go beyond Tobruk, except for modest inroads. If abandon Tobruk and withdraw by four hundred and twenty kilometers to Marsa Matruh, you couldn't get to a front with the same problem? We are convinced that you have to fight at Tobruk to the bitter end »*(W. CHURCHILL, op. cit., p. 241).
- (54) ANTHONY HECKSTALL-SMITH, Tobruk, Blond 1959, p. 47.
- (55) G. SANTORO, op. cited, p. 74.
- (56) *ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

CHAPTER THREE OPERATIONS AGAINST TOBRUK

1. THE DEFENSIVE ORGANIZATION OF THE FORT.

You have already mentioned the important advantage that possession of Tobruk ensured to the opponent, the value of the naval base, defensive and offensive to the function that the fort could take in subsequent operations. Conversely, the Italian-German conquest of the entire territory of the Marmarica until Egyptian border placed the British garrison in a remarkable position fix: restricted summary space and completely encircled more than 150 miles from the frontier, exclusively to supplies by sea. In such conditions, and given the inevitable State of depression of the enemy after the recent setback, one could reasonably hope that Tobruk would easily fall under the pressure of an attack with limited forces and it is under this option you should consider Rommel's attempts to take over the fort before the British were to regain the psychological consequences of reverse immediately and most importantly, before he could write off the material losses suffered in rapid retreat. Rommel thought the time factor was so paramount value to each other: *"I could see clearly that if we had not been able to give the assault on Tobruk we found in a situation very delicate strategic and tactic which had repercussions particularly in the case of a British attack at the front of Sollum"*⁽¹⁾.

Tobruk is included in the broad plateau of Marmarica, flat bottomed and hard, with slight undulations in the Equatorial direction (diagram no. 17). The city lies, protected by steep edge of the plateau, at the bottom of the Bay of the same name, Proceeding from the inland sea, you can schematically to distinguish three characteristic elements. A coastal strip of the proportion averaged 50 m above sea level, sloping on the coast more or less steep and deeply rutted in perpendicular direction from several *Wadis*: the most notable are the *Sehel Wadi* and *Žejtun Wadi*, of which it supported, the wings of fortified walls, the land then climbs gently inward, until an average of approximately

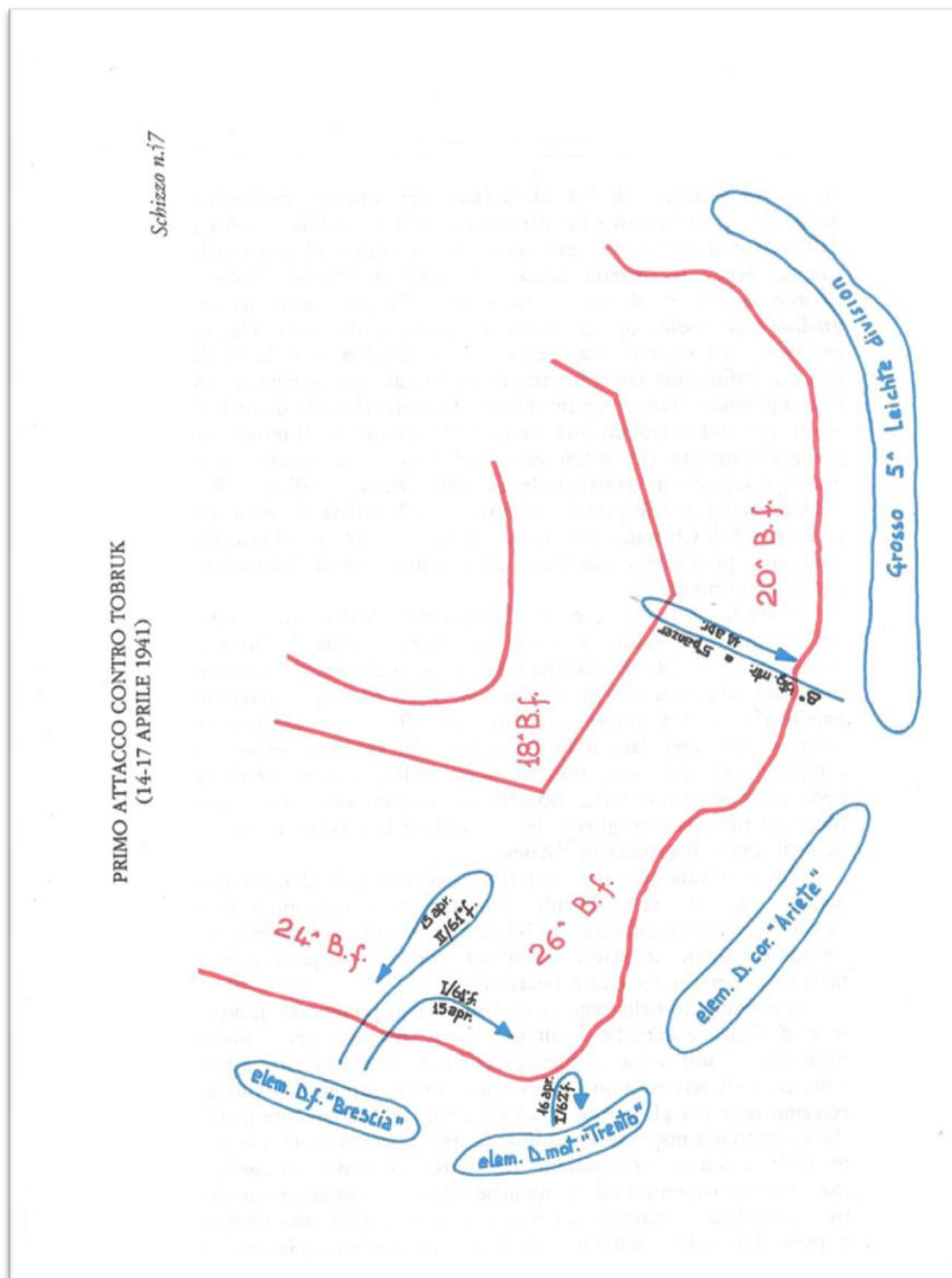
80 m. To the West of Tobruk and presents an average depth of 6-7 km and is crossed by the via Balbia. Southeast of town abruptly narrows to shrink to a slim selvedge. Follow the intermediate narrow Sghifet Chargia range, around 100 m above sea level, connected to the previous one: not very steep step to 50 meters (Hagiag es-Sehel). To the East it ends up to be confused with the coastal strip. Finally a band connected to the previous one by a new step (el Harf Agereb-Hagiag Chargia) that climbs 50 meters more, taking it at an altitude of 150 m. The soil is then gradually rising towards the South and West, reaching higher corresponding to the fortified enclosure: Ras el-Medauar⁽²⁾, which can be considered the keystone of the system, and Sidi Cheiralla, 209 and 167 m. respectively. The marmarico plateau still continues southward, with a series of more or less pronounced undulations.

Beyond the via Balbia road communications in the area were three. First of all the roadway, then under construction, external investment line of Tobruk, drawn on existing track outline: had to connect to access routes West and East with a fitting parallel to Trigh Capuzzo, but it seemed difficult to finalize before three months given the horrendous depths. The connection was made, albeit with lackluster results, given the need to allow the transit of vehicle columns toward the frontier outside of artillery shooting from the fort, and the roadway was named "Axis Road".

Then there were the Trigh Capuzzo, linking Benghazi with Sollum, passing by el-Mechili and constituting a doubling of the coast road in correspondence from el Adem and Tobruk -el Adem beltway, strictly meridian, which was continuing on the track to Bir el Gobi and Giarabub.

The movement in the region of Tobruk was therefore not a difficult item and would have been much easier for our supplies, once the road under construction in the South of the city was completed. The terrain offered no appreciable defense holds, except for the *Wadis* Sehel and Žejtun, deeply incised, which constituted significant anti-tank obstacle. The attack could find modest undulations some corrective to the absolute lack of cover and some help for the observation of the shot, however, hampered during the hottest hours of the Mirage effect and often from sand raised by the wind or by explosions or

First attack on Tobruk



FIRST ATTACK ON TOBRUK
(14-17 APRIL 1941)

also moving columns. An easier and cost-effective penetration was offered by coastal strips of two sections, Eastern and Western, of the via Balbia, as well as astride the roadway for el-Adem. In January, the 6th Australian Division had broke through to the South, in the stretch between the coastal road and the road to el-Adem.

The defensive organization of opposite terrain was designed with the policy to protect the Bay and its works from the action of medium-caliber artillery. The fortified belt consisted of a series of small redoubts, distributed to the chessboard in order to ensure, at least to assure, the intersection of fires of automatic weapons. These concessions were grouped into strongholds in order to better ensure the articulation of Defense. The sore point lay in the possibility of activation of the front of the gorge of the various elements of the system. The location of each work was in obvious concept to take full advantage of the irregularity of the natural environment, particularly noticeable at two well-known *wadi* but nonexistent in flat terrain and naked of the southern front. This intrinsic difference was reflected on the criteria adopted in fortifying-various sectors. All concession had semi-permanent character, with locations in cave or barbette that could be traced to two basic types: one for open areas and one for those looking on *wadi*. On frills they were fitted with seats and anti-tank ditch, instead missing in the works at *wadi*, where the maximum position had been prepared in the cave. Existed, finally, shelters there were for protection of personnel and for sector and subsector commands.

Overall, it was 124 works distributed on double row: 74 on outer one, of about fifty kilometers, and the remaining on the inner, more about three hundred meters backward. The system allowed the use of 247 machine guns or submachine guns and 99 anti-tank weapons. The British side has been commented: "*the works had been their construction on well-chosen locations, but resembled more to shelters and centers of fire*" ⁽³⁾.

The enemy had reinforced the existing organization by developing it on three tiers, identified respectively as red line (outside perimeter represent by the belt of strong points), blue line (intermediate alignment to discontinuous strongholds) and green line (backward positions focusing on old forts Marcucci, Solaro, Airente, Perrone). The denominations responded

not so much a substantial diversity of tasks and functions, the opportunity to determine the order of succession of the fortification work scheduled and to regulate properly the use of reinforcement materials.

In fact, just recently, and precisely by mid-March, Neame had ordered by hand restoration and completion of defensive structures. Because behind the perimeter circle features did not exist which would allow a real depth, was on the blue line that focused efforts in Australia. The 24th and the 18th Brigade, the latter just landed, occupied the most advanced works of the strongholds, while the 20th and 26th Brigade remained on the outside of the fort in order to buy time for the execution of the works, then, in the night on April 9, they went inside the city. The garrison of the perimeter positions was then entrusted to the entire 9th Australian, while in reserve were the 18th Infantry Brigade and the 1st Armored Brigade, in fact a great training unit ⁽⁴⁾.

It is worth at this point, give a quick nod to comparison of defense carried out in January by the Italian XX Corps and the one made in April by the 9th Australian Division:

Garrison	men ⁽⁵⁾	serviceable tanks			artillery		
		Lt	Med	Hvy	Field &Hvy	AT	Naval
XX Corps	22,000	-	10	-	220	117	50
6th Australian Inf. Div	36,000	15	26	4	4 rgt. Of 25 lbs.	2 regt.	-

On the subject of personnel Gen. Pitassi Mannella had found definitely in worse conditions, not only for the outnumbered but also for the heterogeneity of the units. Even more marked negative difference where tanks of the artillery was to favor Italian ⁽⁶⁾, despite being weakened by the range and characteristics of material for tank and heavy field artillery, and much reduced for anti-tank artillery by dealing with the invulnerable *Matilda*. Finally, the relationship between the opposing air forces. While this was not solved primarily by *Stuka*, mainly from the *Blenheim squadrons* No. 45 and 55 raged by obtaining supplies of ammunition on the airports of Tobruk.

Anyway to Gen. Lavarack and Morshead appeared very clear the difficulty of keeping the wide face of the fort. He derived the orientation to a strong reactive forces in reserve, particularly probative yield response from Australian training level and the support of the British tanks. Even for Pitassi Mannella truthful, had deployed several battalions at the back of the strongholds for the immediate reactions at the level of sector and subsector; Unfortunately, operating instrument failures, drawbacks of various kinds and rapid development of events prevented an effective resistance.

The decision not to concede Tobruk was irrevocable by the British. According to Churchill, the fort was to be preserved *“not as a defensive position, but as a valuable beachhead against the side of any serious advance towards Egypt”* and it was possible to hold it because the Desert Air Force and the Mediterranean Fleet were able to cut or at least severely hamper maritime communications between Italy and Libya, as Rommel's ground communications were very long and because it was barring absolutely up to the Valley of the Nile. It was enough to earn time: *“we have there or en route to that destination half a million men and mountains of supplies”*⁽⁷⁾ and Churchill knew that Roosevelt on April 10 had removed the Red Sea from combat zones off-limits to American merchant ships and intended to send to the Middle East all possible supplies following the routes of the Red Sea or the Persian Gulf ⁽⁸⁾.

On the evening of the 14th Wavell was able to write in Eden:

“The two-three hundred German prisoners captured at Tobruk in the morning today, 14 April, claim to have been unfavorably surprised by our artillery fire and had found extremely short of food and water. These soldiers wept when their attack was repulsed; their morale is very low”⁽⁹⁾.

Rommel had begun the first serious attack on Tobruk.

2. THE FIRST ATTACK (APRIL 14-17)

As he recognized a need, Rommel was caught up in a situation that he couldn't resolve without a new attempt against Tobruk.

In the action of 11 April, the 8th Machine-gun Battalion had been pinned to the ground a few hundred meters from the enemy lines. The 12th, taking advantage of an intense *ghibli*, Rommel decided to try again, even to retrieve the units. Towards the 15th, fall suddenly the sandstorm, Gen. Streich had serious concerns and asked if it was the case for implementing also the operation. The peremptory order: “*the attack must be conducted at all costs*”, gave away. On the 18th Col. Olbrich showed up to report: his tanks had failed to pass and the regiment had now some 40 *Panzer* on initial 160. Of the seventy Pzkw III, the best, which had landed in Tripoli, had just nine tanks. Under these conditions it stopped and Streich tiredly shrugged: until the operation had been properly prepared, h must not still venture the 5th light against the fort.

Here we need a parenthesis. Rommel wrote: “*until that moment we were not able to see the Italian maps*”⁽¹⁰⁾. From someone this criticism was taken up by attributing to Comando Superiore to not show the allies the cartographic documentation which it was holding. A similar accusation does not deserve either response. And no doubt that the Commander of the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* launched the first attacks on Tobruk I don't have an exact idea of the existing fortifications in the early days the commanders of the German and Italian divisions, unnecessarily wastefulness in bloody efforts, did not know the type of structure works, but remember that no one had imagined the developments of the counter-offensive. The few topographical maps available at the time were at 1: 400,000 scale, therefore unsuitable for tactical field operations, most importantly in an environment already if arduous guidance, and very easy to generate misunderstandings in relation to positions and odds. On April 19 came from Tripoli, the maps of Tobruk with the directions of the fortified walls. Objectively, might have earned some day, but it was not appropriate to launch veiled accusations of jealousy more silly that out of place.

Rommel was uneasy. The arrival of the *Ariete* induced him to reiterate the efforts. At noon on 13 April, Easter Sunday, Lt. Col. Ponath was summoned to the tactical Command of the *Afrikakorps*. He was entrusted with preliminary action from start to the 18th that same afternoon and conduct a deadline by midnight: the establishment of a bridgehead over the anti-tank ditch, in the section immediately west of the road to

El-Adem ... He was awarded a unit of Sappers and promised a short but violent artillery preparation. In addition the batteries of the 18th anti-aircraft group had accompanied the advance with only pointing shot on fire centers opponents. The penetration of machine Gunners had good start; around midnight, however, the greater adjutant of the battalion came to Streich by telling that the bridgehead had been created over obstacles without encountering major resistance, which was very strange; it was necessary to proceed further in depth? Streich sensed ambushed and ordered to keep the positions reached awaiting attack.

The operation took part everything that stood below Tobruk. The bulk of the 5th Light was on the road to el-Adem at the via Balbia, opposite to the 20th Australian Brigade. The road to el-Adem materialized the direction of the attack and alleged directly to target the junction to the East of the former fort Solaro. Fire support was provided by the 2nd horse artillery and from the I/24th Corps artillery, deployed to the West of Sidi Cheiralla. Further north, elements of the *Brescia* Inf. Div - namely a 75/27 group of horse artillery, three companies of 47/32 and two of 20 mm - had to engage the Western front of the fort, held by the 26th Australian Brigade, riding along the stretch of the via Balbia. In the area of el-Adem was deployed the advanced echelon of the *Ariete* Arm. Div: the V Bersaglieri battalion motorized, I/32nd light tanks, a company with 47/32, II/132nd artillery and an battery from 37/45*. The second step was East of Acroma: the III bersaglieri motorcycle battalion, I/132^o artillery, a company from 47/32 and two 20 mm sections. The rest, as it is known, was at the Egyptian border.

At 4.30, after an intense shot of preparing the 5 *Panzer* Regiment broke into the breach, going up to four kilometers from the city. Everything, therefore, seemed unfolding favorably, when in sight of it Col. Olbrich was forced to stop ⁽¹¹⁾. It was 7:30 and the tanks were without infantry collaboration and without artillery support. Unfortunately the distrust of Streich was more than justified. The 8th machine-gun battalion, boldly penetrated deep on a front of four or five hundred meters, had stopped in the middle of the perimeter band works held by the 2/17th Australian battalion. In darkness and in the absolute ignorance of the structure of workplaces,

* Unknown caliber, likely a typo, the unit likely had 75/27 howitzers

already overnight had lost fifty men killed in ambushes aimed by the defenders hidden in centers of resistance; When the Sun rose up, the battalion was subjected to a concentrated fire without, or nearly so, no chance to react. As regards the Italian artillery, it was unable to neutralize the English batteries for simple lack of adequate fire mouths. Inevitably, therefore, the 5th *Panzerregiment*, finding itself edged out front by a deployment of anti-tank pieces and laterally by the *cruisers* of the 1st *Royal Tanks* deployed hull down, was forced to withdraw quickly to avoid total annihilation. The reaction of the British artillery had been such as to force to leave in place the prisoners taken in the initial phase of the attack.

Around 09:00 Rommel knew that the operation had failed. Shortly after he received a brief report from Streich and Olbrich. Once again expressed his deep disappointment. On behalf of Streich charged pessimism and poor tactics:

"The command of the Division did not possess the art of forming a center of gravity by collecting all the guns, to make breaking into that point, wrap and secure the sides and penetrate inland quickly before the enemy responded".⁽¹²⁾.

The Commander of the 5th Light, since there were, also charged the poor training of the Division: "*Unfortunately I hadn't had the opportunity to personally train my unit before our raid*"⁽¹³⁾. To Olbrich, however, reproached the retreat: "*I was particularly outraged by the fact that the tanks had ditched the infantry*".⁽¹⁴⁾. In fact Ponath's unit remained in Australian lines and not knowing of his whereabouts. Despite all efforts to revive the 5th Light in action and intervene even the *Ariete*, about noon Rommel had to surrender to the evidence.

A few hours before the advanced echelon of *Ariete* had received verbal orders to keep ready to widen and feed the penetration, occupying the positions of Sidi Cheiralla and Bir Umm Haleiga. The commanders concerned had therefore travelled to reconnaissance, however, pushed too forward, had been identified and blocked by enemy machine-gun fire. When Rommel wished to appeal to the Italian troops, the found still on standby. Decided to bring on the ridge of Bir Scerif, which appeared better to lend itself as a base for

a new attempt. The approach of the group was easily located and hampered by concentrations of enemy artillery. The sudden and violent fire said place, all of a sudden, for some clutter in some units, which gave way to Rommel to formulate a searing comment as unfair ⁽¹⁵⁾. In the night and during the next day the 15th the group is arranged on the ridge and implanted an excellent observatory for artillery on the southeastern rim of Bir Scerif.

In the early afternoon of the 14th Rommel was hectic. Did not intend to give up to make a new map: the arrival of a grouping of the *Trento* Mot. Div.. Since morning on Gen. Nuvoloni, Commander of the Division, had been looked for along the track south of Acroma by an officer of the command of the *Afrikakorps*, bearer of urgent orders for *Brescia* and *Trento*, and asked the tactical Command of *Brescia*, located just north of the ridge of Hagiag es-Sehel Island, about 19 km west of Tobruk. Here, at 11:30, the German Officer explained the situation and told the latest directives of Rommel: that same afternoon, at 18:00, the 5th light had to resume the effort just failed; the column of the *Ariete* would attack from Bir Scerif Northeast until q. 144 Hagiag Chargia; the column of the *Trento*, with the support of fire of *Brescia*, had the task of taking control of Ras el-Medauuar and continue up to the former fort Pilastrino, its goal.

The *Trento* was located with an a share of its forces East of Gazala, about forty miles from Tobruk, another for some twenty kilometers west of Derna, the Headquarters with some services units at Ajdabiya, the rest part in Tripoli (7th bersaglieri and the bulk of 46th artillery) and part in Naples (broadcasts and services battalion) ⁽¹⁶⁾. The advanced Echelon was composed of the 61st infantry, I/46th artillery, two companies of 47/32 and service elements. Urged to move, at 17:30 arrived in the area of collection, small valley immediately west of q. 117 of Hagiag es-Sehel, and soon gave way to the preparations. The 61st infantry (Col. Perugini) was to break through at the head of the *Wadi* es-Sehel with two columns that once penetrated the Interior of the wall, had to proceed on diverging objectives: the northern part towards the former fort Pilastrino, the other, decidedly bending southward toward Ras Medauuar that would take to reverse.

But in the 5th Light the climate was different. Rommel had found facing a flaring up by Streich, supported by Col. Olbrich, who had still lost fifteen tanks, and Lt. Col. von Schwerin ⁽¹⁷⁾. Among other things had failed the expected air co-operation of the *Stuka* and conversely British aircraft were raging on the Italian-German positions. Rommel then suspended the attack and sent the next day. “A *second attack had been scheduled (...) but it did not take place*” was written in the war diary of the *Deutsches Afrikakorps*. It was that evening that he reported to Berlin:

“The attempted attack for the front South of Tobruk had to be stopped halfway through after some initial successes because of enemy anti-tank artillery reaction and by location and because of the use of superior air force and naval artillery (...). Depending on the size of the occupying forces defense lines, it can be concluded that they are composed of around three divisions (...).

You can't yet judge of when they can bring a new decisive attack on Tobruk, because it depends on the arrival of new forces. Italian forces were taken on the 14th (*Ariete* Division and *Trento* Division) were used to make denser the encirclement. To their situation in respect of the supplies, these divisions cannot be used for the moment in a long battle.

For these reasons, even the few German forces at Tobruk are linked, so that by the time you must forgo advanced further eastward, despite an exceptionally favorable overall situation”. ⁽¹⁸⁾.

In the night of the 15th the remains of the 8th machine-gun battalion managed to bring in friends: just a little more than a hundred men. Others, including the captain, were left on the battlefield or had been taken prisoner. Evidently the bone was harder than it seemed, or, rather, the offensive was not yet sufficient. Rommel is convinced and gave up the attempt planned for the 15th. At this point there was an unpleasant and not very understandable mishap. Evidently for a mix-up, the verbal order not arrived or suspension, in the overall impression that the opponent garrisoned his Western positions with very little strength, was not understood by the command of *Brescia*, in charge of the direction of operation. So, around 10:00 of the 15th, the Gen. Zambon himself called the Commander of the 61st infantry and tell him that from the area of the former fort Pilastrino many vehicles and enemy units retreating, he confirmed the start of the attack for 15:00 hours. At the appointed hour the 61st

left the base and immediately found itself under English fire batteries not counter-battery from our artillery for restriction of range. According to the plan, the II Battalion reinforced passed cross linked and forwarded to the heart of the defense, but here it became the target of fire and counterattack across the western sector of the fort. Furthermore it miss a profitable base of fire: the III/1st fast artillery had taken a rather backward and initial deployment for more strong connection difficulties existed; the company from 81 mortars was unable to carry out effective accompaniment to the randomness of the identification of objectives; as the company 47/32 guns, the support was nil. It, in fact, was to tow the pieces and arms to shoulder carry ammunition in a very broken terrain and under precise artillery shooting. The I Battalion, reinforced, too, was supported by I/46th artillery. Its action had fate similar to that of the first column. In such circumstances, given the situation, the Commander of the *Brescia* renounced any power of attack and at dusk, ordered the withdrawal, during which units had still much to suffer so much that the II battalion, once back, had to be transported to Gazala to reorganize ⁽¹⁹⁾.

Of the episode Rommel did mention anything and this amazing little, however not all origin of the fact you have to ask the precariousness of the links, the lack of timeliness of news and some appropriateness of conduct for seizing what appeared from time to time the favorable moment.

Meanwhile was came up the 62nd infantry, the II battalion left in Barce and in the afternoon of the 15th was to concentrate at Acroma. At noon on the 16th, Rommel went at the command of the regiment and was the Col. De Luca aware of situation around Tobruk. It was a local action against the stronghold of Ras Medauuar: a slightly elevated position but of significant tactical importance, both because its possession would allow safe penetration towards the heart of the fort, either because the enemy could observe the movements on the back of the German-Italian lines and disrupt the flow of supplies. Rommel's thought was to push against q. Ras 209 Medauuar a unit tanks of the 5th light and one of the *Ariete*; the result of this complex of forces, the I/62^o infantry, reinforced by a regimental mortar company of 81 mm, had to confine itself to settle on q. 201 just west of q. 209.

Rommel left at the command of the regiment major Schroder, as liaison officer.

At 13:30 the battalion began the movement. This had to appear slow to the German officer, who, evidently believing the action underway of the armored complex, began to put pressure for a faster advance. On the other hand, the battalion commander objected not to discern traces of tanks and consequently to consider risky venture forward too quickly, especially as it did not have the support of artillery fire and was completely devoid of anti-tank weapons. After about two hours the battalion reached the trigonometric point of q. 201 er -Rus, where he was struck by an intense interdiction fire. However, it still preceded a couple of kilometers until it reach the other q. 201, that is the goal. Here the companies regrouped while awaiting the intervention of tanks, stressed repeatedly by Maj. Schroder through his command. This while, manifested a counterattack led by II/48th Australian battalion and supported by a dozen armored vehicles. In part because of the surprise, partly due to the lack of anti-tank weapons and, partly, of course, to the incomplete psychological preparation and training, the I/62nd was overwhelmed and captured en masse and started towards the Australian line ⁽²⁰⁾.

We would have to explain the failure to act of the other German and Italian units that Rommel had spoken, but it is far from simple: the use of verbal orders, given directly to individual views available here and there, does not allow a clear reconstruction of events. However, an opponent's move changed or helped edit the initial requirements. More or less simultaneously at the beginning of the attack I/62nd infantry, a column consisting of walking and mechanized units, presumably belonging to the 18th Australian Brigade, moved to the Bir Scerif Ridge. It was difficult to stop the attempt, which perhaps had an offensive reconnaissance, but skipped every tactical link with the 62nd infantry.

At 14:30 Rommel asked the command of *Ariete* to start an exploration with armored vehicles to q. 209 of Ras el-Medauuar to "*ascertain whether the position was still occupied by the enemy.*" The order is very strange: q. 209 should not be occupied by German and Italian tanks? and where was at that time the I/62nd infantry? and the *Panzer* where were they? We are not able to provide any clarification in this regard, given the lack of

documentation and, above all, the generic nature of the reports available. However, the I/32nd tank with a dozen light tanks and seven M 13 of the VII Med. Battalion - not only were the long desert runways blocked by mechanical breakdowns – it set in motion and with a large turn in the area of q. 201: just in time to see the I/62nd led captive to Ras el-Medauuar. The Tank formation did not know or had no way to intervene; certainly weighed on its passive attitude the fear of hitting prisoners and inadequate light tanks, however a vigorous initiative wouldn't have spoiled ⁽²¹⁾.

The next morning, 17 April, Rommel went in command of the *Ariete* and, having expressed to Gen. Baldassarre its strong disappointment over the loss of the I/62nd infantry and the empty mission of the I/32nd tank, renewed the request for another attempt at Ras el-Medauuar. This was supposed to be carried out by two companies of the German infantry, supported by the means of the 32nd tank and backed by fire of a German machine-gun company. They were “put together” four M 13 tanks, and seven tanks L 3, all conducted by volunteer officers. In addition, at the time the *Ariete* could not provide because of countless failures. “*There was to hear prick up your hair thinking of the armament the Duce sent his troops to battle*” Rommel remarked. Gen. Baldassarre, given the adverse events of the previous day, wanted to speak personally to the officers before the action.

“*Even in the new assault on the Hill of Ras el-Medauuar almost nothing worked properly*” had to comment on Rommel. True, but not entirely according to his account. From the German side, the machine gun company and riflemen companies did not arrived late, when the tanks unit had already entered the field alone ⁽²²⁾. It is worth to add that there was no link whatsoever to adjust the attack and that it had not been designated a commander responsible. The tanks departed from Acroma around midday and without suffering losses surpassed the barbwire entanglement reaching q. 209. At this point came the inevitable conclusion. The barrage and British suppression broke up tanks and pinned the riflemen. As if that weren't enough, in the back in the middle of the fuss still efficient tanks were there and then swapped for British and two of them hit by three Germans anti-tank guns suffered by *Africakorps* Commander. Rommel is resigned: with available forces was not

possible to reason of the defense “*also and above all because of poor training and equipment of the Italian units*”⁽²³⁾.

Recent events have left their mark on the division commanders. As also generals Streich also Nuvoloni and Balthasar were beginning to bite the bit without discussing on certain failures, they had to complain about the break up and use their large units in bite size bits. Nuvoloni on the afternoon of the 17th showed up at the tactical Command of the *Afrikakorps* asking to confer with Rommel. As he was absent, had a long conversation with the Chief of staff, Col. von dem Borne, during which he supported the need for the *Trento* could at least take certain order of completeness. Rommel received Nuvoloni the next morning, at 07:00. Admitted that the 16 April episode, an accumulation of unfortunate circumstances had compromised the success of the day; then assigned to the *Trento* of the Acroma sector by providing that all units of this Division upon the orders of the *Brescia* were the natural organic dependencies. It was a provision the implementation of which proved very laborious and took three days: the I/61st infantry and 106th 47/32 gun company late in the afternoon of the 18th were used, with two heavy companies or the German 15th motorcycle battalion⁽²⁴⁾, against hill 209 of Ras el-Medauar and still could not return to *Trento* if after replacing in the area of *Brescia*, with III/battalion 8th bersaglieri. Not only that, but on the 19th the commander of the *Trento* received verbal notice to move with almost all its units (including the II/62 arriving from Barce) in the area of Salum.

The April 21 Rommel expressed his own opinion on the situation to the OKW. British forces at Tobruk and on the borders of Cyrenaica continued to be stronger than the German ones. The *Mediterranean Fleet* and the *Royal Air Force* were master of air from Sollum to Tobruk⁽²⁵⁾. The domination of the Mediterranean and the events taking place in the East Mrica and Greece put the enemy to submit, in the near future, other battle hardened divisions to the Cyrenaican theater and, moreover, they noticed troubling clues at Sollum of aggressive intentions. Resume the offensive towards the Canal before the fall of Tobruk was unthinkable: only the conquest of the fortress could provide the bulk of the *Afrikakorps*:

"After the fall of Tobruk-continued-we will strive for the occupation of Marsa Matruh and hold the connecting line South to include Siwa. Is no doubt that the elimination of Marsa Matroh can really lead to a further delay. Anyway so far reached positions must be maintained and secured by provenances from the South, with the occupation of Siwa-Giarabub.

A main premise for deletion of Tobruk and for any further action towards the East is a ready reinforcement of airpower, so that you can stop the current activity of the British fighters, bombers and naval forces, completely undisturbed. Later, the realization of project operations will be possible if fuel supplies, ammunition and water will be secured by aircraft, transport units are sufficiently protected by fighters. For a more successful offensive, if you want non-stop operations midway due to lack of forces, you must complete the 5th Light with a powerful Armored Division and sending at least another German motorized Division, with corresponding Corps troops. Even this need for troops, according to the English, you can simply transpose only if will be conducted within the next 4 or 6 weeks.

The front of Tobruk, which is spread over 50 miles, has large gaps that, with the existing forces, cannot be filled. It is the intention, for the near future, to fill these gaps with troops that are already moving to the area, supported by *Stuka* attacks that would demolish the fortifications of Tobruk piece by piece, with the simultaneous occupation of the fortress of Bardia with too many Italian and holding in check the enemy East of Sollum with German advanced units“⁽²⁶⁾.

In connection with these intentions, Rommel begged the Comando Superiore for the two Italian divisions in order to give them the task of encirclement and to recover in this way, for the 5th Light operated and the *Ariete*. On 24 April the *Trento* (except the 7th bersaglieri) needed to reach the border and take over the defense of Bardia and Sollum; the German units in the area have become available they could attack, probably on the night of the 26th, the enemy near Sollum and beat it so heavily “*that it for the next time will not be able to undertake attacks*”⁽²⁷⁾. Consequently, for the 1st May became feasible the new and final attempt against Tobruk with the 5th Light and 15th Panzer (the units already have arrived, the *Ariete* and the *Brescia*. At 21:30 on the 21st the Commander of the *Afrikakorps* sent to *Trento* the executive order of movement toward the border, but the next day he sent the countermand.

Since 12 April Gariboldi had brought under his tactical Command in Benghazi to follow more closely the operations. Among the various issues that had been presented, three

required his personal attention: the recovery of material scattered across the Cyrenaica, the Italian authorities on Cyrenaican *Jebel* and logistical support of forces under the command of Rommel.

The collection and remittance in material efficiency dropped presented great difficulty for Stewardship. In only Agedabia and Benghazi were abandoned 120 artillery pieces, 500 vehicles and 50 medium tanks (mostly set on fire). Of course, the first point was to recover and this was obstacle in transport deficiency, extremely busy to transfer too much and setting up logistical bases in Derna and Gazala.

The second issue will prove far more delicate soon than we might initially imagine. The retreat of the 10th Army had created a dangerous and fretful in situation the *Jebel*. The British occupation had essentially military character, i.e. it had cared for possession of few cities and security of communication lines. Things very easy to get Arab elements more agitated (that rightly or wrongly denounced abuses committed by the Italians, former soldiers of the Libyan divisions disappointed stragglers, common criminals, etc.) turned against the Italian colonists and since the abandoned weapons were not defective, armed groups established a climate of fear and robberies.

Among other things, the British Command of Cyrenaica had constituted a local police (Libyan Arab Force), mostly consisting of *ascari* Libyans of the Senussi faith, fallen prisoners and enlist volunteers. These units carried out police service especially during the night hours, when the hour of curfew was extended also to the Italian police forces remained in place. These Libyans remain mostly hostile and marked.

When took place the conquest of Cyrenaica, it was to restore order while avoiding individual actions, bringing to our control the disappointed and wayward and capturing the rebels. Gariboldi ordered him to focus on an active propaganda aimed to first disarm, spirits and that the commanders of all levels dictated to employees the observance of rules of demeanor towards the national and Muslim population and the prohibition of any retaliation: the police were sufficient to ensure public order. Albeit slowly, this policy began to bear fruit. Within a few weeks the

the situation improved significantly: settlers most of them return to work and occasionally complained of abusive grazing Arabs herds in plots worked by Italians. In this respect it should be noted that one of the main reasons for friction consisted in the fact that the natives, allowed-it seems-by the British authorities, had gradually invaded the Italian colonization areas, either temporarily tentage and livestock and thereby causing considerable damage to crops in progress. Apparently follows the return of the Italian administration, Arabs had retired from district, but stopped their allowances and tending to exploit them covertly. Consequently, the clashes between the natives, reinforced with abandoned weapons or taken from looted magazines, and settlers, armed, also became frequent with many dead and wounded on both sides.

Gen. Marghinotti, *gebel's* control, had to report that the buoyant spirit of revenge emerged during the brief British rule-and during which however were not a few episodes made by Arabs in favor of our civilian and military national, prisoners of the enemy – was replaced a State of distrust and waiting; in some indigenous British resistance to Tobruk was exploited to the detriment of Italian prestige and did appear as possible the return of the British presence across the Cyrenaica. When the Arabs had regained confidence in the Italian Government's stability their disarmament would have been spontaneous, and therefore total, and was followed by that of the colonists. Meanwhile, Marghinotti concluded that much needed, civilians, settlers or not, which the military gave the Arab world the exact impression that the Italians were would not do anything to harm them, to reduce frictions and especially the causes that determined them. He admitted, though, not to be able to eliminate the causes of Arab discontent, partly because many units in-transit escaped his control, and many were the damaging initiatives of irresponsible elements. However, the troops were not to intervene: their presence was already sufficient deterrent.

The situation was delicate and undoubtedly, among the various measures adopted, there will also be to move from Tripolitania in Cyrenaica the best elements of civil administration. Let's say right away that this state of affairs will be repeated, aggravated after the second English conquest of eastern Libya and will remain without appreciable solution; that from part of the Italian military

occur harassment and abuse, although more or less promptly punished, they will not be able to derive that hatred and rebellion ⁽²⁸⁾; fluctuations of the operations, the difficulties of life, the comings and goings of unit and the large number of isolated squads arriving and departing will extend also to Tripolitania accidents like that, many of whom caused by Germans as evidenced by complaints collected by police headquarters in Tripoli and Misurata.

The logistical support of too many around Tobruk and spread to the Egyptian border was the third main issue. On 22 April Gariboldi met Rommel at the road inspector's house of Ain el-Gazala. Wanted, among other things, demonstrate an inability to help him as he wanted. Already a week before had written, clearly, that, in terms of allocation of means of transport suitable for the desert, the *Afrikakorps* and *Luftwaffe* units were clearly the Favorites, to the detriment, of course, supplies and Italian movements. The British offensive in the Strait of Sicily, naval and air, seemed to intensify, which required a greater effort on the part of the R. Aeronautica and the R. Marina While the 10th *Fliegerkorps* was diminished because of its efforts in Greece. Ultimately, the Comando Superiore was unable to secure an affordable supply of advanced units, which recommended “*facing the new situation in order not to lose the benefits*” ⁽²⁹⁾. Now the repeated difficulties and told him explicitly to find it impossible to send him the two divisions required for blocking of Tobruk. That he could do was to accelerate the influx of all elements of the *Ariete*, *Brescia* and *Trento* divisions, 2nd rapid artillery and 16th Reg. of Corps artillery, with three groups of 105/28. He also moved the *Bologna* on *gebel* and concentrated *Pavia* at Derna. For action towards the oases of Siwa and Jaghbub the speech appeared premature, although the study project: it was necessary to find the many means of transport and fire, which was anything but simple. Rommel reconsidered the situation at the border and concluded that current principals of Bardia and Sollum could be regarded as sufficient. For Tobruk, would be tried with the divisions in place, duly completed and sorted, and the 15th *Panzer*.

But in the meantime had a new success, very unfortunate episode. Uncoordinated action of that period and their outcome had made sense to Gen. Morshead's time to pause where Rommel himself

was resigned. Had begun to perform small acts of combat and patrols to keep the aggressive spirit of his men, is to poke the besieged. So, on the evening of 19 April a large patrol attacked hill 201 West of Ras el-Medauar. It was placing the III bersaglieri battalion of Lt. Col. Fabris, who had just replaced the infantry I/61st. The attempt fell immediately, even for the first responders of the few M 13 available. At the dawn of the 22nd took place, however, a new and more incisive action simultaneously in three different areas: in the South, between the 5th Light and the *Ariete*; Northwest, straddling the via Balbia, against *Brescia*; to the West, again against hill 201. To the South the incursion was clearly rejected by the V battalion and VII bersaglieri battalion. To the Northwest, a reinforced company 2/23rd Australian battalion succeeded after a hard fight to take some prisoners, but ultimately was also refused with losses. On q. 201 instead things went differently. A company of 2/48th Australian battalion, reinforced with three *Matilda*, and backed by a battery of *Royal Horse*, arrived to overcome the defense of the III bersaglieri battalion -whose Commander, Lt. Col. Fabris, died two days later for the serious injuries-and achieve the deployment of artillery I/132nd (his goal) blasting two pieces and capturing a total of about three hundred prisoners. The crisis could be dominated in the morning with the I/61st and II/62nd infantry with four M13 and three *Panzerjäger*: general action had cost the enemy lost nine tanks and two armored cars. Other losses suffered in the afternoon by the German Airforce during release and the withdrawal of strikers by the defensive wall. In the evening, finally, after a brief artillery and air bombardment the Australians attacked again against the northern wing of *Brescia*, but were again repelled without much effort.

The obvious difficulties of the situation highlighted by opposing the resumption of these minor actions that seemed to expose a weakness of Italian troops in combat had generated disappointment and bitterness in Rommel, causing him to shift entirely to ally the negative elements of the circumstances in which it came to be, dragged from his own impulse, at the end of the glittering counteroffensive raid. In his anger he directed to the commanders of the three Italian divisions a tough circular:

“In recent days have repeated unpleasant case of lack of discipline in combat and resistance force at some Italian units. Thus, among other things, on 22 April an Italian units has suspended the fight after a short time, despite being provided with all the modern weapons (including tanks) and with sufficient artillery and surrendered in front of the advanced of 8-10 English tanks. Only here have fallen men and 200 prisoners was lost numerous important material. A battalion of another Division, later carried out on the same positions under the protection of some German tank hunters, folded in the day twice in a row after minimal artillery and enemy aircraft. With such behavior in a decisive point of the front was over the grave danger to the entire operation against Tobruk. You can cancel with existing weapons and with resolute resistance every bet, even of enemy tanks, showed the behavior of *Brescia* Division units, which have rejected an equally strong episode of enemy infantry and tanks advanced up on their artillery positions, and with this action they burned 4 armored cars and 2 tanks and captured 5 light machine guns, as well as a certain number of prisoners (...).

However, if similar cases were repeated unwillingness combative, I will be forced to report through the Italian Comando Superiore the Duce and put on trial at the Military Tribunal in Rome masters, officers and ranks (...).⁽³⁰⁾

The effect of the letter is easily imaginable: the three generals, especially Baldassarre and Nuvoloni, they grumbled openly with the superior Commander⁽³¹⁾. Gen. Gariboldi was a man on the spot, calm, little inclined to get carried away by impulses. Ran across a lot of the units, without ostentation, and loved to see things in person. With Rommel had [myth to adopt a course of action rather cautious to avoid being vilified from Rome. Known issue, wanted to get to the bottom. He went from Rommel and asked to be specified the facts charged, then listened to the witnesses without flinching. So was the generic mitigating, but mostly put out the need to take account also of the episodes and prevent postings between individuals, which could harm the camaraderie on the battlefield. Rommel recognized mitigating circumstances (inadequate armament, combat, first use the straggling absolutely far from training and mentality of the Italian divisions, etc.) and modified in the project for the new attack on Tobruk.⁽³²⁾ Lastly Gariboldi wrote to the divisional a letter firm and dignified:

"I read the letter sent by General Rommel, Commander the group divisions.

I understand your pain but you must admit that despite attenuating the facts are true. Italian witnesses confirm them.

Ease to give prisoners without excessive losses.

Ease to abandon positions due to artillery fire and aerial actions (not certain serious losses).

Many companions of wounded that they no longer return online (several officers accompanied the Lt. Col. Fabris; He was seen accompanying a wounded six soldiers who walked beside him,).

And others of which I asked for clarifications to sort its investigations and take appropriate action.

These are all facts that impress unfavorably. Ineffective then the susceptibility, even if deployable. Here there is something more important to save. Better to respond with positive facts to negative ones. And this aspect of your employees in future actions. You, personally, as commanders do not have to be crippled. We know your personal action.

Now raised morale of the troops and especially of the executives. Put the units in the best conditions for responding to their task. Take all necessary measures to withstand the enemy action. And above all convince employees that no loss there is war and that to have the right to be praised we deserve to facts and not just words.

The past had mitigating, the near future would not. I trust your enlightened work because these clouds are cleared from the heroism of tomorrow.

And not threatened, because I there is not faith, let alone there will be need.⁽³³⁾

At the end of the episode, Gariboldi thoroughly briefed the Comando Supremo. Mussolini replied immediately approving without reserve the attitude taken by the top commander.

For debt of objectivity it should however add that Rommel was not tender at all even with German troops. In July, will report to OKW that *"during the offensive in Cyrenaica, and especially during the early stages of the siege of Tobruk, there have been numerous instances of disobedience to my clear and specific orders from my commanders or delay in performance; There have been events that have flirted the insubordination and some commanders have succumbed in the face of the enemy "*. Gen. Streich his days are numbered; the Chief of the G.S. of *AfrikaKorps*, Col. Von dem Borne, soon will be replaced; the operations Bureau Chief, Major Ehlers, also will be sent back to Germany. It was definitely a moment of great tension.

In Rome he regarded with concern both the operating problem represented by Tobruk is composed of logistic supplies overseas. The latter, in particular, always weighed

more since the tonnage transported in quantity to Libya had become far less than demand. Two characters moved to an on-the-spot. On April 11 Gen. Attilio Teruzzi landed in Tripoli, Minister for Italian Africa who remained for ten days: limiting the inspection of Libya. The 18th it was the turn of Gen. Roatta. Although the overall situation is deemed favorable and the convenience to redesign of the move soon toward the canal, the sum of the measures to be taken was huge: rapid influx of the German 15th armored Division and *Trieste* motorized Division; completion of, all existing divisions in Northern Africa; a solid Constitution of logistics base in Cyrenaica. Roatta, therefore, had to weigh exactly operating instrument conditions in Tripolitania, where on April 15 had reconstituted the 5th Army under the command of Gen. Mario Caracciolo, and in Cyrenaica, where one had to see clear on the issue of armored units. On 20 April, after talking with Gariboldi and reserve an interview with Rommel, Roatta telegraphed to Mussolini that if the garrison of Tobruk had persisted in resistance to the bitter end for unanimous assessment would have been very difficult to get right with force, rather try, to surround and also with the few troops that could come in a few days. Particularly felt was the lack of medium-caliber artillery, whose sole, quick remedy appeared heavy use of aviation. As for armored vehicles, he asked Baldassare a report on the behavior of M 13 and drawbacks arising from lack of personnel training. The very detailed report, compiled by the Commander of the VII Battalion, was presented in its entirety ⁽³⁴⁾. In essence, the main causes of the failure and much anticipated performance of most modern vehicles built by Italy were those who had weighed negatively at Beda Fomm: insufficiently trained personnel for lack of time devoted to technical and tactical training, total absence of units of specialists concerned, certain technical deficiencies (such as the lack of engine power), impossibility of recovery and repair of damaged material for lack of appropriate means and personnel, lack of radio in tanks ⁽³⁵⁾. This list and the *immediate* use in combat could not cause bitter disappointments. At that time the VII Battalion had before Tobruk a dozen tanks, of which half inefficient and half barely able to move, another dozen were still locked on the slopes

and remaining in the desert, approximately twenty-five tanks, painfully recovered and painfully in marching towards Derna for the full review. Of 46 tanks landed in Tripoli at the time, only six were in terms of condition to do something and bad.

In Berlin the comments were acidic. At least those of Halder, who feared that the *Africakorps* was thrown into difficulties such as to force the OKW to give it much more reinforcements needed elsewhere (Operation *Barbarossa* could not suffer further delays):

"In all these days-he wrote on 23 April in his diary-Rommel did not send a single clear report and believe that the situation is very confused. Official reports from the African theatre, as well as a private letter, prove that Rommel is not up to its task. All day runs between his units too scattered, organizes offensive reconnaissance that disperses his weak forces (...). The point piecemeal small armored forces are very expensive, the engines of their vehicles are in poor condition and many of his tanks should be replaced (...). Aviation cannot meet his nonsense requests, particularly because of the fuel crisis (...). It is imperative that the situation be clarified without delay (...)"

In this atmosphere of skepticism and criticism Gen. Paulus was sent to Northern Africa, quartermaster general in the *Wehrmacht*, "*to examine the situation together with Rommel and decide what it was to be sent, also by more than airplanes, The 15th Armored Division*)". Probably, though, was to probe the intentions of Rommel and let him know not to expect aid and accept the conditions for an effective defensive action if it had made it necessary to abandon the ridge of Salum. In other words, according to the diary of Halder, was to "*stop this man who now gives the numbers*".

Paulus then arrived with an opinion rather close to that of Gariboldi. Given the difficulties posed by the harsh siege-fatigue of his troops, summer heat, hardship of life in the desert-and the interdependence between the two fronts of Tobruk and Salum, who wanted the availability of an appropriate mass of maneuver to fend off both promptly attempts to sortie from the fort and those of circumvention of border positions, might as well gather all forces in the area of Ain el-Gazaia, West of Tobruk and reorganize them, giving them a certain logistical support. Rommel, needless to say, opposed it outright: never would have lifted the siege of Tobruk and advanced units withdrawn from the frontier. After a long discussion, Paulus went on to

approve the plan for a new attack on the fort. If this was the fall, he had decided to order the impetuous Commander of the *Afrikakorps* merely to ensure possession of Cyrenaica, stopping on the Sollum - Siwa line⁽³⁶⁾.

3. THE SECOND ATTACK (30 April-2 May).

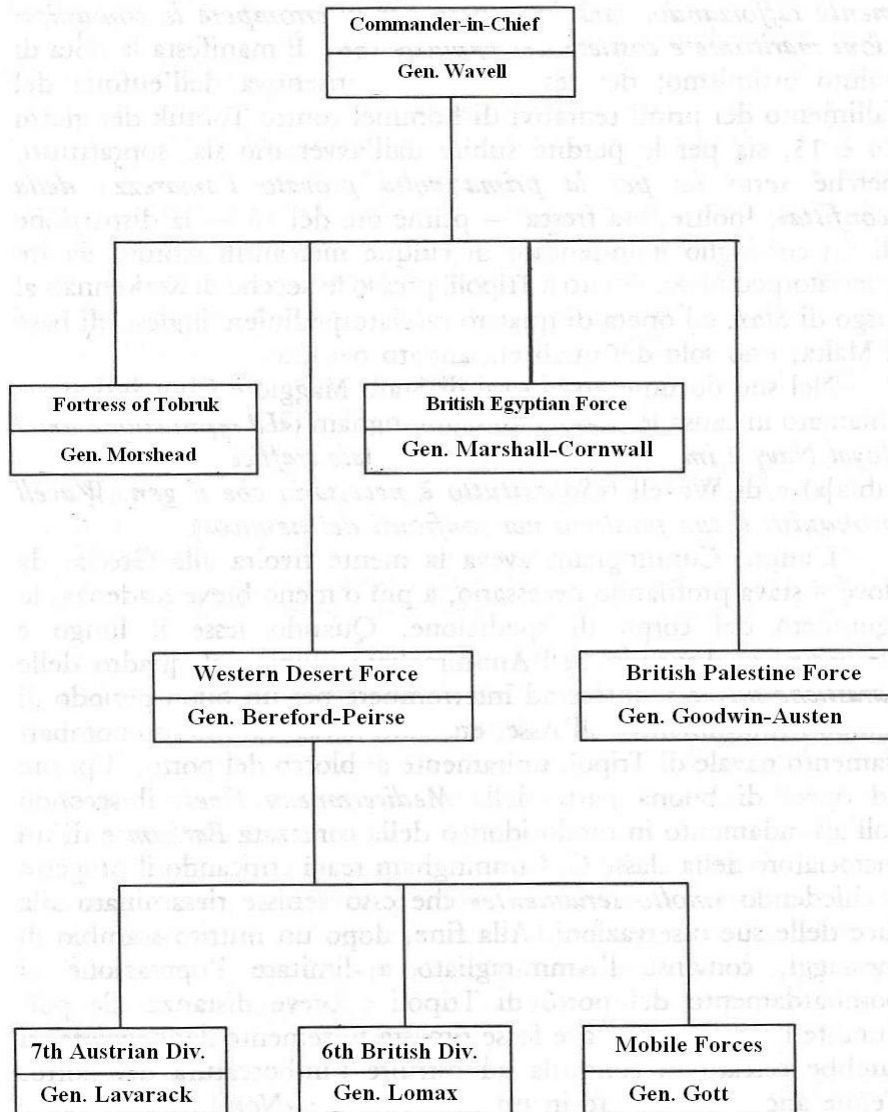
If in Berlin and in Rome there were reasons for concern, as it existed in London. On 14 April Churchill sent to chiefs of staff a directive embracing the whole war in the Mediterranean.

The premise was an assessment is very simple: If the Germans received reinforcements and supplies needed across the Mediterranean and along the via Balbia it envisaged the possibility of very serious consequences. Otherwise, if the above-mentioned roads, sea and land, were lost and tormented, became expected their defeat. From such considerations came a clear course of action.

The *Mediterranean Fleet*, duly reinforced, was to "*stop all maritime traffic between Italy and Africa with intense use of the units in the area and in collaboration, wherever possible, submarines and aviation.*" In order to achieve this result, losses, though painful, could not be worried about. Of course, it was necessary to knock out the port of Tripoli with periodical bombing and Malta well suited to provide the escort of naval hunting forces. As for the stretch of the via Balbia from Tripoli to el Agheila (650 km), particularly vulnerable because fewer possibilities for control and defense, must be subjected to an oozing of commando actions, landed from *Glen* type. The all-out defense of Tobruk was granted. This entailed not only the sending of reinforcements of infantry and tanks, but also the creation of a mobile armored reserve such as to allow the effective Commander of the fort "*and continue raids against the flanks and rear of the enemy*". As for the *Royal Air Force*, its use against enemy communications and concentrations of troops was obvious⁽³⁷⁾.

All in all, Churchill was more pensive for Greece than for Northern Africa. As he wrote to Roosevelt, a couple of days later, of 600-650 Panzer, of which Rommel presumably

**THE ORGIZATION OF THE BRITISH COMMAND IN
THE MIDDLE EAST
on the date of 15 April 1941**



had a high percentage could be deemed destroyed or inefficient and difficulties for supplies seemed obvious. Against the *Afrikakorps* and the Italian forces in Egypt was contacting British with yet efficient tanks and those coming from repair shops. After all, then, in the Middle East, there were about 500,000 men! "*We don't feel any less in the air and we become stronger every day. All the power of the Mediterranean Fleet, we are greatly strengthened, will be employed to stop coastal and maritime communications of enemy*"⁽³⁸⁾. It shows the desired note of optimism; Moreover, the letter followed the euphoria of the failure of the first attempts by Rommel against Tobruk on the 14th and 15th days, either for losses incurred by the opponent is, above all, because "*it has for the first time tried the bitterness of defeat*". In addition, was cool-the early hours of the 16th - the destruction of an Italian-German convoy of five merchant ships escorted by three destroyers, bound for Tripoli, at the sandbanks of Kerkennah off Sfax, by four British destroyers based in Malta, only one of which was lost.

In his report to the Chiefs of staff Churchill had summoned the personality of Cunningham (*the reputation of the Royal Navy is engaged to stop this traffic [between Italy and Libya]*) and Wavell ("*above all it is necessary that Gen. Wavell win back his prestige in with the enemy's fronts*").

Adm. Cunningham had his mind given to Greece, from where he was profiling necessary more or less short term, the eviction of the expeditionary force. When he read the long and extraordinary Admiralty dispatch: to be applied within the framework of the "*drastic measures*", in order to stop for a good period of time axis supplies had been decided an intense bombardment of Tripoli along the blockage of the port. The first, by a large part of the *Mediterranean Fleet*, the second with the sinking so suitable of the battleship *Barham* and a C. class Cruiser Cunningham responded by criticizing the project and asking "*very seriously*" that it be reviewed in the light of its observations. Eventually, after a rich exchange of messages, persuaded the Admiralty to limit the operation to the bombardment of Tripoli Harbor at close range. If, during the action, a ship had been severely damaged, you would have tried to take her to block the mouth of the harbor. He also held to clarify in a dispatch that "*do not remain idle*

as far as Libya and no one can say that the Royal Navy the neglect " ⁽³⁹⁾. Of course it wasn't at all thrilled to lead the fleet in front of Tripoli by exposing it to unwarranted risks and with little chance of achieving the desired objectives, but it was always preferable to the sacrifice, in his opinion, useless, of *Barham*: there was one chance in ten to bring the battleship in the right position, the loss of the ship would have been too great a gift to the Italian fleet and personnel losses definitely high.

At the dawn of the April 21 appeared before Tripoli battleships *Warsprite*, *Barham* and *Valiant*, the cruiser *Gloucester* and nine destroyers (Force B) and in support, the aircraft carrier HMS *Formidable* with the escort of three cruisers and four destroyers (Force C). The Naval bombardment lasted from 04:00 to 5:45. It was a complete surprise for the Italians, but it was also a huge disappointment for the British: the city and the port facilities were, admittedly, serious damage; the moral effect was noticeable, but the loading and unloading operations at the port were suspended for one day only.

On the morning of May 23, when the fleet was returned to Alexandria unscathed, Cunningham hastened to clarify his own thoughts to the Admiralty:

“(…) I would like to make it clear that I remain firmly opposed to this system to bombard Tripoli with the fleet in the Mediterranean. We did it once, but only because the German air force was engaged elsewhere (...). It took five days for the entire Mediterranean fleet performed what a team of heavy bombers operating from Egypt would likely have accomplished in a few hours (...)” ⁽⁴⁰⁾.

But the greater concern for him was the domain of the Mediterranean air. The settlement of the *Luftwaffe* in southern Greece would render precarious the supply of Malta from Alexandria. To win the battle of convoys, the *Mediterranean Fleet* was in need of an adequate air force, and without an *Royal Air Force* decisively strengthened the forces of Wavell would not have held for a long time, so to try to save the situation the fleet would have to suffer heavy losses. “*The reason- Cunningham later wrote -for which the authorities in his country were unable to see the danger that we ran in the Mediterranean for the lack of adequate air support exceeded my chances of understanding*” ⁽⁴¹⁾.

The events in Greece were plummeting and Mar.

Longmore had asked, among other things, standards for the use of his air forces. On the 18th Churchill intervened again and pointed to the order of priority of the various needs that they were coming to the fore more or less simultaneously: first victory in Libya, then the expeditionary force evacuation from Greece, then the supply of Tobruk unless you demonstrate indispensable for victory; the Iraqi situation could be ignored for the moment and focus on Crete efficiency much later.

The first need was to provide the 204th Wing (Commodore Collishaw), from which, after the recent reorganization, controlled on all the units of the desert:

Squadron # 73 (Hurricane) to Tobruk, then retired to Sidi Haneish;
Squadron # 274 (Hurricane) at Gerawla;
detached Squadron # 39 (Glenn Martin) to Varuna;
Squadron # 45 (Blenheim IV) at Zimba.
No. 6 Squadron (Hurricane & Lysander) to Tobruk.

Instead Wavell did not speak at all to win. The day before, the 18th, I went for the last time in Athens, he expressed to the leader of the Imperial General staff their ideas on the situation in Africa. Undoubtedly had improved – on the 17th a new attempt by Rommel had broken against the defenses of Tobruk - however the weak point for British forces was in the tanks. The enemy had at least 150 online, of which half of medium tonnage, largely focused on the frontier in Bardia-Salum. English side instead, besides the small group of Tobruk, there was only a squadron of *cruisers* at Marsa Matruh. By the end of April he hoped to have a regiment of *cruisers* and one of infantry tanks, both less one Squadron. Probably, in May, the workshops were put in thirty or forty other *cruisers* and *Matilda* ⁽⁴²⁾. Around here, since you couldn't expect to retrieve anything from Greece. Unfortunately, then, the latest news on the German Division to arrive in Libya were alarming: it was not another 'colonial' Division but a real armored Division, which meant more than 400 tanks, of which 138 medium ⁽⁴³⁾. "*If the enemy will get supplies –finished - there will want to stop it!*".

Shortly after sent this dispatch, Wavell returned to the charge with another argument: by May were previewed in

Egypt only two *cruisers* regiments, while in place experienced and trained for six regiments. And the *cruisers*, desert war, were better-suited to infantry wagons, less fast and less autonomy. “*Chief of Imperial General staff, please give your support staff*” concluded.

The support, full and vigorous, the said Churchill. There was departing for Egypt, the route of the Cape of good hope, a convoy with tanks: well, the ferries of that convoy, loaded with armored vehicles, were changed en route to Gibraltar and crossed the Mediterranean, at the cost of losing half of the material. The five cargo ships carrying a total of 250 tanks, almost all for infantry: well, the Ministry had to procure the reorder within two days—a couple more ships, on which it was necessary to load a hundred *cruisers* removed to better existing armored Division in England. The crossing of the Mediterranean was judged extremely dangerous because all subject to attacks of *Stuka*: well, the Admiralty and Aviation Ministry would devise and prepare immediately a plan to pass the convoy, taking any risk. These decisions by Churchill, communicated to the heads of Staff the 20th, gave rise to operation *Tiger*. Instead, however, of a hundred tanks removed for an Armored Division, were prepared for a second expedition 67 *cruisers* Mark VI. The letter Churchill called the good news to the Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East was characteristic of the man. Given the announcement of the expedition 99 *cruisers* of Mark IV and Mark VI ⁽⁴⁴⁾ and 180 Matilda, and their spare parts, declared himself confident that the 7th Armored Division, “*whose absence makes it come so unexpected*” ⁽⁴⁵⁾, continued his successful career; asked to know your plan for getting into action these tanks as soon as possible “*and wished that no German should be anymore in Cyrenaica by the end of June*” ⁽⁴⁶⁾.

Wavell was naturally very-satisfied, though ... a few days later, on 27 April, ended a dispatch for the Chief of the Imperial General staff with this admission:

“I must confess that the operations of the Germans so often exceeded [my] calculations, which I'm not sure that they will not go beyond our predictions about their chances. [For example] they last night began an advance from the Sollum area, which you couldn't justify on the basis of what we knew about the situation of their supplies” ⁽⁴⁷⁾.

The last days of April were devoted to the labored development of the Defense Crete. Gen. Wilson, there landed along with the expeditionary force evacuated from Greece, did a quick calculation and said that, overall, it took at least three brigades of four battalions. Also expressed considerable skepticism about the chance to successfully defend the island, less than a big joint effort of the three armed services, which he knew was quite problematic. The 20th Wavell flew to Crete and entrusted the command to Gen. Freyberg tasked with keeping the island at all costs ⁽⁴⁸⁾. Gen. Wilson was sent to take the Chief command in Palestine to meet the Iraqi crisis and the developments of events in Syria.

Meanwhile Rommel had kicked off a second attack on Tobruk. A summary of the location of the Italian-German forces at the end of April was as follows (diagram n° 18):

a. at the border, on the positions of Bardia- Sollum, under the command of Col. von. Herff:

Mamman column: command 8th bersaglieri, XII bersaglieri battalion, a company of 47/32 of the 7th bersaglieri and a battery of 20 46th artillery;

part of the 15th *Panzerdivision*: 3rd recon group, a company of the 15th machine-gun battalion;

XV group of 105/28 artillery of the 16th regiment Corps artillery.

b. before Tobruk:

Brescia Division: almost complete, minus the I/19th infantry (in Benghazi), the III/19th infantry and the II/20th infantry (in Tripoli). The reinforced 1st quick artillery, which replaced the organic Regiment, and the grouping of the 16th artillery corps with three groups of 105/28;

Trento Division: almost complete, minus the II/62nd infantry (at the border) and a large part of the services (in Naples).

The 7th bersaglieri and the 46th artillery had arrived to found here;

The Ariete Division: almost full, less the column

Montemurro (at the border). The II and III light tank battalions had reached the big unit. In the 2nd quick artillery reinforced and the XXII battalion of sappers.

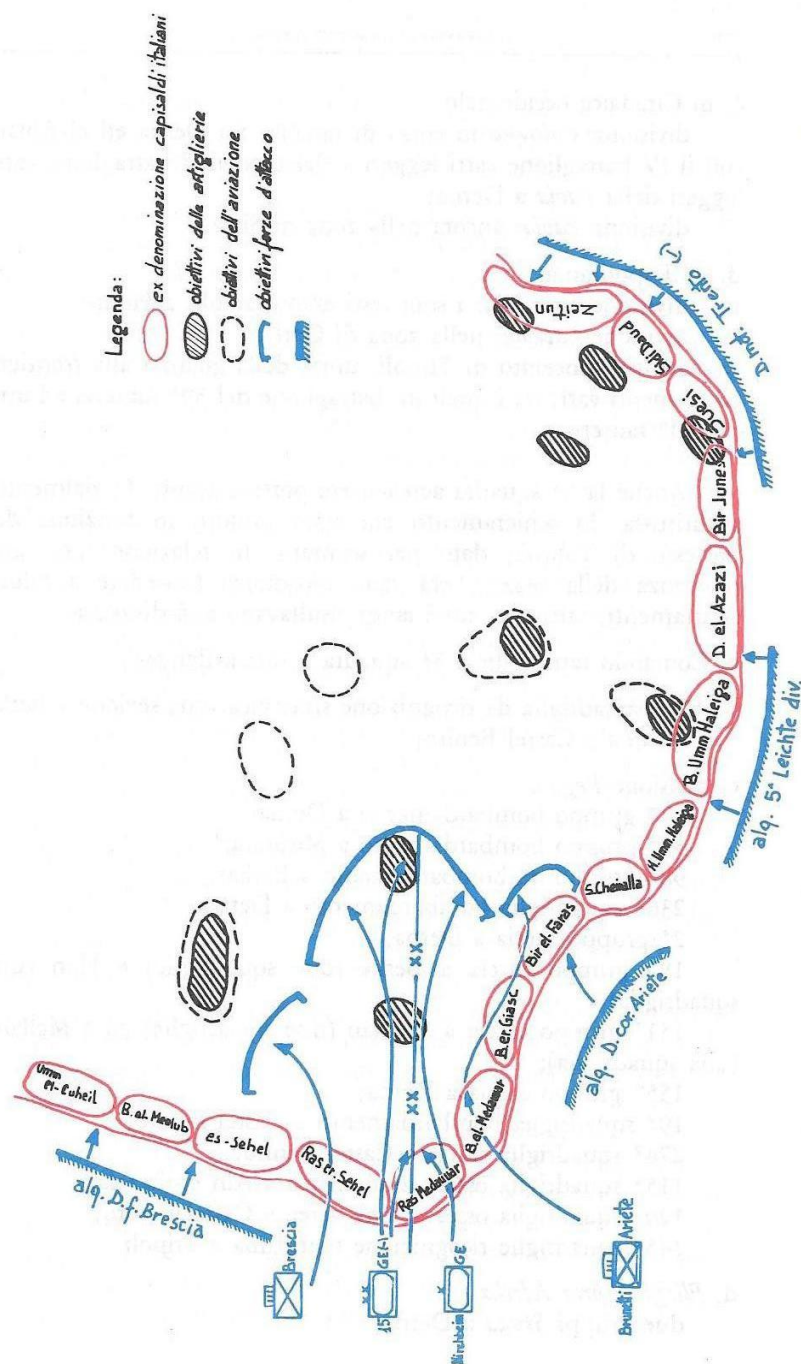
5th light Division: almost full;

15th *Panzerdivision*: Division command, 115th Infantry, 15th motorcycle battalion (less one company), part of the 8th tank Regiment and smaller units.

The Second attack on Tobruk

SECONDO ATTACCO CONTRO TOBRUK
(30 APRILE - 2 MAGGIO 1941)
(Il disegno operativo)

Schizzo n. 18



c. Western Cyrenaica:

Bologna Division in the course of collection at Derna and el-Abiar, with the IV Battalion light tanks in Barce and V light tanks battalion of *Pavia* at Derna.

Pavia Division: still in Sirte.

d. in Tripolitania:

Sabratha Division: its remains were collected at Homs;

Savona Division: in the area of Gharyan.

Tripoli's entrenched camp: border guard units and various items. including a battalion of the 39th infantry and one of the 40th infantry.

Even the 5th Air Fleet had carried out. Initially, even the deployment had been taken in relation to the possession of Tobruk, taken for granted. In the report, then, the resistance of the fort, was clearly making certain adjustments, such that air units were thus distributed:

a. Tactical Command of the 5th Air Fleet: in Benghazi;

b. 175th strategic reconnaissance squadron: a section in a Castel Berka Benito;

c. *Pegaso* Division:

27th Bomber group at Derna;

53rd Bomber group at Misurata;

98th Bomber group in Berka;

236th Bomber Squadron at Derna.

2nd Fighter group at Derna.

18th Fighter group at Berka (two squadrons) and at Hon (one squadron);

151st Fighter group at Sorman (two squadrons) and at Mellaha (one squadron);

155th Fighter group at Derna.

19th Bomber Squadron at Castel Benito;

274th fighter squadron at Castel Benito;

115th air observation Squadron at Gazala.

129th air observation Squadron at Castel Benito;

145th maritime reconnaissance squadrons in Tripoli.

d. *Fliegerführer Afrika*.

two *Stuka* groups at Derna.

one fighter squadron Me. 110 at Derna.
one reconnaissance squadron Ju 88 at Derna.;
one fighter squadron Me. 109 at Gazala ⁽⁴⁹⁾.

On April 25 Rommel had summoned the division commanders to report and to communicate the new directives for the attack. The break had to be sought on a single section at Ras el-Medauar, rather than two, namely (map 5) between Harf Gasr el-Agereb and el-Cleicha. All the remaining front would have been struck by energetic actions, demonstrations designed to disorient and angering the enemy. The mass of breaking, divided into two blocks of forces operating closely, was the realization of a large semicircular bridgehead: 160 km of the via Balbia-ex Forte Pilastrino -Bir el Faras. The Northern block was composed of units already arrived of the 15th *Panzer* to reach the area northwest of Pilastrino and an part of the *Brescia* Inf. Div. to reach 160 km and provide protection to exposed flank. The South block was composed half of 5th Light with all armored means to achieve the efficient stretch South of the Pilastrino and a part of the *Ariete* for protection of the portion of the exposed flank and the conquest of Bir el-Faras.

North of breaking ground, the investment front was manned by the remaining troops of the *Brescia*; to the East by the remaining units of the 5th Light and *Trento*. There was a particularly strong artillery preparation eastward before the positions of the *Trento*, to confuse the opponent, and the aerial bombardment would have gravitated on organization's vital defensive areas. The date had not yet been established, however, the provision had to be completed by April 30, according to carefully studied times:

April 26: approaching the first part of the *Trento* until to the standby position, behind the 2nd Machine-gun battalion and of *Santamaria*. First recon and implementation of the work of deception;

27 April: approaching the bulk of *Trento*; night on 28: replacement of the 2nd machine-gun battalion and a unit of the *Santamaria* ⁽⁵⁰⁾. Operating rate approaching the 5th Light to the rear of the *Santamaria* unit. Approaching the Kirchheim group until their waiting position. Armored vehicles however had to stop behind the right side of the *Ariete*;

28 April: implementation of the plan of deception;

night of the 29th: setoff of 2nd machine-gun battalion to Acroma. A mobile part of the 5th Light Division rate: a part in the 15th *Panzer*, one of the Kirchheim group, the unit of the Santamaria to the *Ariete*;

29 and 30 April: implementation of plan of deception with all the vehicles of the 5th light and of *Trento* on the South front;

30 April: relocation of a 7th bersaglieri battalion, reinforced by a machine-gun company to Gambut, about halfway between Tobruk and Bardia, ready to be used in the Southeast sector of Tobruk or in the Sollum area. The primary task of the battalion was the safety of the via Balbia and runway South of it, from Tobruk to Bardia and fort Capuzzo ⁽⁵¹⁾.

Rommel attributed great importance to the deception plan, intended to induce the enemy to fear an attack by the 5th light and the *Trento* and in the border area, manned by the Herff group. Therefore prescribed for those sectors a series of painstaking steps: strong radio traffic; strong lifting of dust and much movement on the via Balbia and on track for the fort Capuzzo; armored vehicles visible displacement inefficient; marked patrol activities; intense rocket fire, colored (except, of course, red ones, to be used only in case of real enemy raid alarm); noise of artillery fire; many departures and landings of “cicogne” arrival. The implementation of the plan was to achieve the maximum of 30 April ⁽⁵²⁾. Of course, in the real sector of attack needed to take the inverse of these measures. On the contrary, Sollum needed to implement real offensive show, with the assistance of the aviation, tending to Sidi Barrani and Sidi Suleiman.

Between 28 and 30 scheduled movements took place, as well as some other shift. At the same time were carried out with the greatest intensity of the development of logistics and the crowding of ammunition, fuel, food and water, despite the major shortcomings in terms of transport and environmental difficulties.

The operative part of the defense was virtually unchanged: the 24th Australian Brigade in the Northwestern sector, astride the via Balbia; the 26th Brigade in Central sector of Ras el-Medauar; the 20th Brigade in the southern sector of Sidi Cheiralla al mare; the 18th Brigade in reserve along with the armored group. In particular, the 26th Brigade, that would bore most of the brunt of the attack, had two battalions, the 2/23rd

DRAFT PLAN OF ATTACK ON TOBRUK

30/4/41

18:45-19:00 "Stukas" attack on the positions at hill 209 (Mdauuar) as well as on points of breaking of the 15th. Arm. Div and Kirchheim group. Assault troops advancing as far as they can there shelter against full visibility. Approaching tanks to assault the troops covered the view of Earth from behind the front line.

19:00 – 19:10 to artillery fire on hill 209 and breaking points. At the same time artillery preparation on the rest of the front at the Brescia Div., Ariete, 5th Div. Light and Trento on points of breaking assault troops (fictional organization) under the provisions of divisions.

19:10-19:15 increased artillery fire (4 rounds per minute per gun) and the concentration on breaking on either side of Mdauuar.

Launch smoke on 209.

Assault troops with tanks assigned approach as far as possible obstacles. Other forces must be sent forward at the head until to the waiting line (last shelter).

19:15-20:15 front break. For the floor fire see map.

19:15-19:25 Break in on more advanced enemy positions on both sides of Mdauuar. At the same time in the remaining front at Brescia, Ariete, Trento div. and 5th Light assault troops closer to the front edge of the enemy defense line, here particularly strong activity of fire with machine guns, and anti-tank artillery, smoke and even rockets. Break the more isolated defensive positions when the enemy surrenders.

19:25 -19:35 enlargement of breaking into the depths of position on raiding places on both sides of Mdauuar.

The sides possibly blinding smoke.

19:35-20:15 Breakthrough up behind Mdauuar and 187 and enlargement of share points of breaking into lateral sense.

19:45-20:15 Breaking fortified positions of Mdauuar from the wrong side and front-to-right break to Bir el Mdauuar sector included, and left to the field area of the Sahel is included.

and the 2/24th, deployed in strong-points and 2/48th in sectoral reserve. Even the General Organization was much improved. The Inshore squadron, a heterogeneous collection of ships and boats in charge of supply by sea, had delivered during the month of April around 5,000 tones of material, including many mine, and twelve *Matilda*.

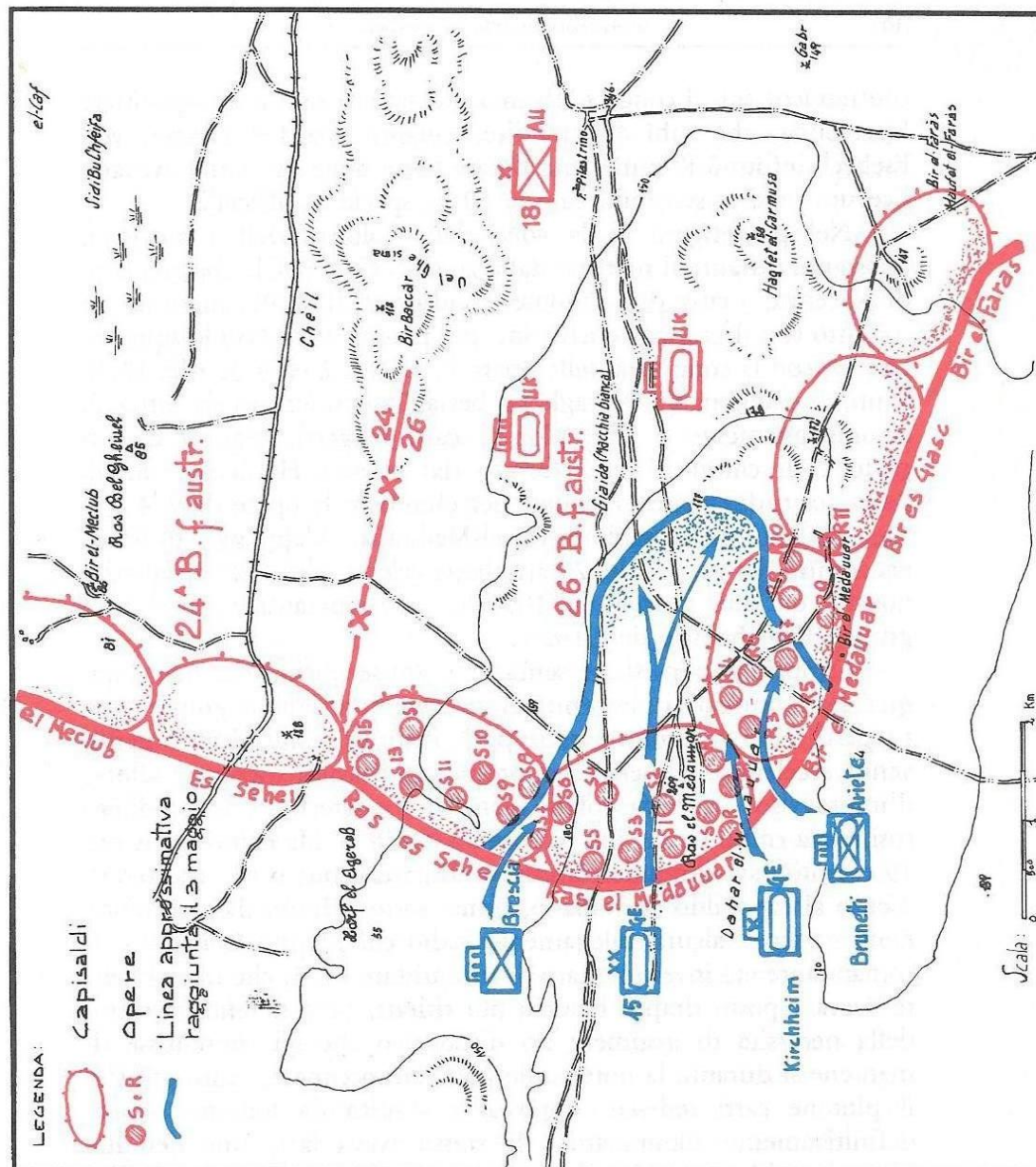
According to the operation order issued the 27th and its chronological plan ⁽⁵³⁾, at 18:30 on 30 April was provided for the intervention of the *Stuka* attack sector and especially on the positions of Ras el-Medauar. At 19:00 it started the fire to prepare while the troops were leaving the starting basis. At break achieved, it was necessary to widen the gap and consolidate the positions reached. During the night the artillery would move forward in stages, in order to be able to support the continuation of the attack at dawn of May, after a new thread of *Stuka* and fighter actions and fighter-bombers against enemy reserves. At the appointed hour numerous aerial formations launched against q. 209 and all positions of fracture. At 19:15 advanced units assaulted the works. The 15th *Panzerdivision* ⁽⁵⁴⁾ was commanded by Gen. Hans-Karl von Eisebeck, who had replaced Gen. von Prittwitz, the operating part of the 5th *leichte Division* ⁽⁵⁵⁾ was under the command of Gen. Heinrich Kirchheim, who, wounded after the capture of Derna and transported to Tripoli, had been invoked as a matter of urgency, still convalescent, at the front of Tobruk, a transparent demonstration of distrust by Streich.

The fight which occurred was immediately fierce, despite the careful smoothing performed by *Stukas* and artillery, and at 21:30 the 2nd Machinegun battalion managed to conquer the back of q. 209 of Ras el-Medauar (sketch No. 19). The gap was open to a depth of about three miles, but the attack was unable to progress.

At 2:30 went into action the column of *Brescia* ⁽⁵⁶⁾, reaching at 07:00 the barbwire. The first targets were the S 13 and S 11 works the stronghold of Ras el-Sehel, however, carried out by sappers the opening of the gates, the units first echelon oblique to right: was to eliminated the works S 7 and committed S 9, while accompanying weapons favored by the action of the von Eisebeck Group against works S 3 and S 5 of the cornerstone at Ras el-Medauar. Unfortunately the violent reaction not only stopped the attack and rejected the 20th infantry, but managed to lead a

L'ATTACCO ITALO-TEDESCO CONTRO RAS EL-MEDAUAR
(30 aprile - 4 maggio 1941)

Schizzo n. 19



counterattack with armored vehicles to destroy the column, which suffered 400 casualties. As for the 15th *Panzer*, von Eisebeck informed Rommel that much of his units had received sensitive loss, up to 50%, especially in officers.

In the afternoon, it was the turn of the column of the *Ariete* ⁽⁵⁷⁾.

A small amount during the morning from Gasr el-Cleicha to the base, about two miles South-West of hill 209, it immediately contacted the Kirchheim, to pass through the hole created by the conquest of R, R 1, R 2 and R 3. At 17:30 the first echelon (V bersaglieri battalion reinforced by accompanying units and two platoons light tanks), followed by a platoon of five *Panzer* provided to the Hohmann unit, began the attack in the East-Southeast direction to delete the works R 4 to R 11, i.e. all the cornerstone of Bir el-Medauar. Fire support was provided by the 2nd artillery groups and 132nd rapid artillery, as well as by two groups of 105/28, all operating in favor of Kirchheim and the *Ariete*.

There was not at first great difficulty, but after a few hundred meters a number artillery arrived between the subject units. There were no casualties though, instinctively, the movement was accelerated. The bersaglieri appeared to move appearing then so suddenly, some white handkerchiefs: works R 4 and R 5 fell so without striking a blow. Then it was the turn of R 6. But they were already 19:00 hours and dusk rapidly loomed. The battalion was only in the middle of the Australian strongpoint, now under fire by enemy repression without any wireless connection with their command. The Commander had indeed attempted to conquer the R 7, which initially had exposed white drapes then retreated, but realize the need to take a disposition that would allow him to remain overnight on positions held, especially since the German tank platoon, after following from afar, it was definitely out of the way and he had one of two light tanks platoons. He sent an officer to ask for orders and reinforcements to the column Commander, Col. Brunetti.

In the East, on the evening of April 30, a fighting patrol of the *Trento* had attempted to penetrate into the stronghold of Wadi es-Zejtun, but had been blocked by the fire of the defenders.

At dawn on May 1, at the far right, near the coast, another large patrol was able to enter the stronghold; However it too was soon arrested. In the afternoon Gen. Nuvoloni received order of restrict some disturbance fire.

From the British side the attack was not entirely unexpected, although the radio intercepts showed an uncertainty on main direction. As far as the strong-points came little information, command of the 26th Australian Brigade soon realized that the tenacious resistance of several works exceeded by the Germans penetration and the containment carried out by the more arrested defensive structures were sufficient to stop the progression of the attacker. In invested sectors had taken place dynamic local reactions, but a more forceful counterattack led by 15 *cruisers* and 5 *Matilda* and well supported by artillery had tried to restore the situation somehow in the breakthrough. All efforts were in vain, results also an attempt to put in place in the evening by the 2/48th battalion at Ras el-Medauar failed. Certainly Italian-German aviation had contributed a lot by bombarding five times behind positions and reserves.

Pulling the sums, had fallen the most important pillar of the belt perimeter and the gash opened in the meshes of defense was about five kilometers wide (at the base) and two to three miles deep. 16 armored vehicles were destroyed and 275 men taken prisoners. The outcome of the operation was not that expected, but there was still hope.

Rommel recognized that resistance was still strong, realized that his armored troops, imbued with the spirit of Blitzkrieg, were unforeseen difficulties in the hard fight against infantry positions strongly held. So, in the early hours of May 2 sent new orders. Maybe he himself resigned perhaps-most probably-Paulus won forcefully, in view of the losses and the worrying shortage of ammunition. The fact is that penetration should be now sought only where they presented favorable conditions. The attack had to be expanded wherever the opponent gave signs of subsiding, on both sides of the gap, in order to create a continuous system from R 11 for hill 177 (1.5 kilometers south of Giaida) southeast of hill 173 (two miles west of Giaida)- hill 159 (2.5 kilometers Northwest of Giaida) up to works S. 8 and S. 9. On each position occupied to soon buildup up the troops and settle in defense, so as to minimize losses. In other areas it was necessary to continue with the demonstration measures designed to mislead the enemy. In particular, it was necessary to bring out the presence of tanks even where it wasn't expected their use.

New orders, in essence, tantamount to a setback in the development of the operation to give time to the rearrangement of the disposition, clearly needed to silence the defenses put in place by the Australians on the side of the perimeter belt, at Wadi Sehel, and overcome resistance still further with a more effective destructive action, be entrusted mainly to the *Stuka*, on hard-points and on sides of artillery. They wanted to wait for the air inflow of German pioneers, already much in demand in Berlin, specifically equipped and trained for the capture of the fortified works.

The breakdown of the forces was thus a rehash. The areas were now three: West, entrusted to Gen. von. Esebeck, and held by the 15th *Panzerdivision* and *Brescia*; Southwest, given to Gen. Kirchheim with direct orders to his group and the *Ariete*; South, entrusted to the Gen. Streich with part of the 5th Light and the *Trento*. General prescription: reject any enemy attack.

In the stretch of Bir el-Medauar the situation was slightly improved. At around 3:30 the entire Brunetti column had reached the V bersaglieri battalion and before sunrise the R 7 work was conquered. Then took over the stasis, punctuated by artillery fire and automatic weapons and some attempt to dynamic reaction on the part of Australia despite strong sandstorm. The most relevant, at 17:00, launched buy fifteen of armored car and *Bren carriers*, was knocked out by the anti-tank pieces, a few hundred meters away.

During the May 3 the fighting became stagnant. Towards 21:00 the Commander of the V bersaglieri battalion was giving orders for the employment of surprise for the R 8 works, when, suddenly, raged on the bridgehead extremely brutal artillery fire. When the fire thinned out, advancing through the dust emerged the Australian companies. Gen. Morshead had decided to launch the reserve Brigade, the 18th, against Ras el-Medauar. It was not a success: the two battalions in the first echelon, which were to converge on the goal, despite having earned approximately one kilometer failed to open up and soon the counterattack broke into a series of unrelated fights. The fight had also involved the left side of the Brunetti column in the V bersaglieri battalion, and culminated in the unsuccessful effort of the opponent to regain R 7. Given the disappointing outcome of the initiative, Morshead would not expose the 18th Brigade

such a reaction of the German armored forces in broad daylight, so in the early hours of the 4th ordered the stoppage of the scuffle. At 7 a.m., Rommel went to the command of the *Ariete*, anxious to know the story of the night. When he learned that the bersaglieri had kept the land conquered evident disbelief. Whereupon the Gen. Baldassarre, resentful, replied curtly: "*links have been restored. You can speak with the commanders of the forts* " ⁽⁵⁸⁾. This time the Commander of the *Afrikakorps* thrown off balance: "(...) *My Special thanks and knowledge-he wanted to clarify the agenda that on May 6-sent to the brave members of the Ariete Division and an outstanding defensive fighter on the day of 3 May have made vain any enemy advance and kept in their hands the works won the previous day. And honor and joy to me to express this knowledge (...)*".

Losses incurred from April 30 to May 4 were of German and Italian 740 658:

Unit	Fallen		Injured		Scattered	
	Officers	NCO & Ranks	Officers	NCO & Ranks	Officers	NCO & Ranks
<i>Ariete</i> Div.	5	82	6	67	1	114
<i>Brescia</i> Div.	4	60	16	238	3	120
<i>Trento</i> Div.	1	3	2	18	-	-
5th Light Div	3	37	5	120	-	45
15th Arm. Div.	4	81	16	261	1	85

The commanders of the *Ariete* and *Brescia* were meet with little satisfaction by the use of a large unit. Gen. Baldassarre signaled that the III and V bersaglieri battalion was reduced to a company each. The three tank battalions of the 32nd infantry tanks and the: V battalion light tanks of the *Pavia* had a total of 40 light tanks and flame throwers, while the 7th medium tank battalion was left with only 5 M 13 tanks efficient. Good, on the other hand, the situation of the artillery and anti-tank pieces, except it gives 37/45: the company of 37th ant-tank only had one cannon in ten and the battery of the 132nd only five artillery on twelve originals. The Santainaria column, then, had lost its commander, wounded, and was reduced to five nucleus (each of two machine guns and two American anti-tank rifles), three pieces from 47/32, one by 20 mm and a 75/27.

The framework provided by the Gen. Zambon was worse: the two commanders of infantry regiment hospitalized, the fort depleted numerically, the lower officers badly, artillery material largely worn out or inefficient. And he laid out specific complaints, too. Apart from the allocation of German General sectors regardless of seniority can "those Italians, it was evident the lack of coordination between the efforts of German and Italians. There was to think that DAK's Commander had incorrectly assessed the efficiency of defensive organization English. In summary: the Division was tired.

The second attempt for the conquest of Tobruk could consider ended negatively, but Ras el-Medauar, the Western abutment of the defensive walls remained in German hands.

Of course local actions continued. On 5 and 7 May the opponent repeated, again without success, the attack in the Giaida area and performed a bet South of the same city. On the morning of the 13th attempted offensive reconnaissance on the front of *Trento*, on the coastal road and North of this, at Sidi Daoud: the Division dismissed the action and once again Rommel was solicitous to express their recognition in the agenda. Meanwhile he had ordered the *Brescia* divisions and *Ariete*, 15th *Panzer* and Kirchheim group to employ assault groups against enemy strongholds, and works for limited objective. In the night of the 16th, while at the border the situation was quite fluid following an attack by the British just that morning, the *Brescia* launched three groups composed of Sappers and infantrymen, respectively against S 11, S 13 and S 15 of the stronghold of Ras es-Sehel. Open the gates in the barbed-wire fences, the groups passed over but despite the intense fire of automatic weapons of the fort and found themselves on the immediate mind sectoral provisions. Devoid of the officers fell almost immediately struck to death, and subjected to heavy losses, the groups found shelter with difficulty through the gates and barely could regain the starting point.

The *Ariete*, on the other hand, employed two groups against the works of R 9, stronghold of Bir el-Medauar, and R 11, the stronghold of Bir el-Giasc. Units, reached about twenty meters from the barbwire, entered a minefield "Tripped the alarm and no surprise, it became impossible to proceed with the opening of gates so the company was abandoned" Finally, the actions of the Kirchheim against works by R 8 and R 11 and the 15th

Panzerdivision against stronghold 22 near hill 150, and against the S 8, S 9 and S 10 works earned only the occupation of S 10, where were captured four officers and twenty soldiers. The next day the enemy responded, around midnight, with an action near Bir Scerif and a big bet with infantry and tanks North of Ras el-Medauuar, both cut short by artillery fire.

Gen. Paulus had followed the progress of the operation. To the end that any further initiative was banned. Task of the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* was take the Cyrenaica, without much concern of border positions and even of Tobruk. For this, it was necessary to maintain the fort's blockage and prepare a defensive line at Gazala. In the report that he sent to the OKW, Paulus said openly that the German Corps was in difficult logistically and tactically precarious conditions. It was essential to a concrete and consistent action, suitable first and foremost to protect maritime routes and defend the ports of Tripoli and Benghazi, secondly to send to Libya stocks in order to remove the concerned to live hand-to-mouth, anti-tank and medium caliber artillery, and completion of the reinforcement units:

* * *

You will recall that Rommel, the question put to ironic enough to Halder, on 20 March in Berlin, about the way to supply his troops, had replied: "*These are his problems!*". Now it was the extreme seriousness of the conditions under which stood for "*supply difficulties*", as expressed in a letter to the family written on 9 May. Let's say right away that the German side, the OKW as the *Afrikakorps*, criticisms were entirely reversed on the Italian ally, in charge of convoys across the Mediterranean. It is certain that at least three of the charges were more than justified: the absence of concrete arrangements aimed at the collection of conspicuous stocks throughout the period of non-belligerence, taking advantage of the security of maritime routes and the great availability of ships; the senseless loss of 212 ships for a total of 1,216,000 tones, equal to 35% of the total, due to a proclamation of a State of war announced unthinkingly, without even trying to avoid capture, the internment or scuttling of ships in navigation out of the Mediterranean; failure to upgrade the ports

of Tripoli and Benghazi. The latter was especially important for any operation based in Cyrenaica, because it would eliminate more than 1,000 kilometers of roads between the two cities. The artificial port of Benghazi was unloading a thousand tons a day. At the beginning of hostilities had been completed the main works, but remained to be carried out important works of completion. Could accommodate ships up to 300 tons and in limited numbers: thus, no, so, convoys of a certain size. Many destructions had been carried out on infrastructure in Benghazi during the retreat of the 10th army; the British had refitted a little during their brief occupation and other destructions added at the time of their abandonment of the city, reducing practically to zero the possibility of utilization of the port. In the days immediately following the Italian occupation, he had placed his hand in the work of restoration. One of the first steps was the transformation of the wreck of a large steamer, resting on the bottom with relative stability, condition a Pier 160 meters long and 4.50 meters long⁽⁵⁹⁾. Rather optimistic studies, made in April by the Navy Comando Superiore indicated the possibility of bringing about 2000 tons per day, the exhaust port potential, using simple equipment upgrades. In fact, only towards the end of May could be started in Benghazi some steamer of modest tonnage and throughout 1941 the port possibilities get around, on average, about 4-500 tons per day. Finally, the port of Derna was simple point of support for the small tonnage, in favorable weather conditions accessible; its power did not exceed the 500 tons per day.

The lynch pin of British naval action against the traffic between Italy and Libya was represented by Malta. Initially overlooked in the second half of 1940, the island was gradually assuming the role that competed, at the expense of our maritime communications. With the transfer of X *Fliegerkorps* to Sicily, Malta began to be held under heavy aerial bombardment and pressure for some time traffic through the Central Mediterranean Sea returned to unfold with a certain tranquility, so as to allow the carriage of the *Afrikakorps* and various Italian units to quickly restore the situation seriously compromised by the annihilation of the 10th Army.

The April 14 on Gen. Guzzoni, where, as Vice Chief of the General staff, was the discussion of the problems of

overseas traffic, held a meeting which was attended by leaders or staff of the General Staffs of the Armed Forces and Gen. von Rintelen, military attaché and head of the German military mission in Rome. By Gariboldi and Rommel were invoked measures to resolve the certainly difficult situation.

All available vehicles had been used to give mobility to the Italians who had participated in the successful "fast advance" and now the units left behind were unable to tighten the positions reached. According to the assertions of von Rintelen, losses of vehicles and tanks suffered by the *Deutsches AfrikaKorps* amounted to about half of the equipment, even though it was mostly damage repairable at departmental workshops. Those suffered by Italian divisions were even stronger, for replacement tablet deficiency and specialized. During the discussion was placed on the ability to proceed with the transfer of personnel by air. About von Rintelen heralded, for the 26th of the same month, the arrival in Foggia of German transport planes. For materials needed instead continue with maritime transport. Guzzoni observed that perhaps it was not to discard the use of warships for the transport of materials. Gen. Santoro made it immediately clear that, for an effective increase in participation in the battle of air communications, lacked adequate ground organization. For his part Adm. Riccardi said the lack of utility of warships for the hypothesis in question. In an absolute sense, the use of destroyers allowed a very limited cargo volume. Furthermore, the use of this type of ships, already much reduced for losses incurred, would have affected the number of torpedo boats available for escort, and therefore, ultimately, about the same number of convoys to be able to perform. The R. Navy had proceeded and proceeded to the protection of routes with minefields and undertook all the light vessels efficiently in escort services. Wanting to assign more ships to the protection of convoys, it would be necessary to protect the ships themselves with another light vessels. Furthermore, the availability of ferries for the composition of convoys was very strict. All this, then, without taking into account the increased fuel consumption, administered by Germany with extreme parsimony.

A few days later Guzzoni in a new interview with von Rintelen, always on the same topic. No doubt about

the need to insist on the bombing of Malta for the indirect protection of traffic; Similarly it was expedient continuously harass enemy activity in the Delta and the Canal; Finally, it was necessary to "tighten up close" Crete, once masters of Greece. According to the Division of tasks set out in its time, the Aeronautical Command of Sicily was the protection of traffic with the Libya, the island's air defense and escorting bombardment formations in Italy and Germany. The X *Fliegerkorps's* forces, more numerous and qualitatively more satisfying, were entrusted with the offensive against Malta and tasks on the Strait of Sicily. In view of this, Guzzoni evoked a wider German participation against naval targets. From Italian side would be increased to 5th Air Fleet in Libya and Greece bombers increased. In this sense, and considering any fundamental objections not by the Allied Supreme command, gave orders to the staff of the R. Aeronautica. However this orientation was to fall when the OKW demanded that the Italian aviation took over the entire task of neutralizing Malta and escort convoys, since the X *Fliegerkorps* was soon moved to full in Greece for "*closer approach to Cyrenaica and Egypt.*" On 25 April, it was decided the occupation of Crete, the base from which the X *Fliegerkorps* would exercise control over the Eastern Mediterranean, to replace VIII *Fliegerkorps*, which was transferred to the East for Operation Barbarossa. Of course the movement had implemented, despite the objections put forward by the Italian side and also by Adm. Weichold, connecting with the General staff of the Navy, who wrote in Berlin highlighting the inappropriateness of withdrawing the whole Corp of Geissler from Sicily, and then from the Central Mediterranean, since the R. Aeronautica would not be able to bear the burden of Malta and transport by sea ⁽⁶⁰⁾.

On 25 April, Adm. Riccardi personally represented to the Comando Supremo the heavy incidence of escort service on employment opportunities and systematic training on this; the worrying situation in respect of merchant vessels due to loss, to March, for a total of 68 units for 235,000 GRT, struck at sea on various routes in the Mediterranean or in ports by aerial bombardment; the threat exerted by Malta and Crete and the danger that British forces could not adopt a long-term attitude definitely offensive against our traffic with North Africa.

"In such case there is only one remedy of remarkable effectiveness: minimize sea routes, using ports of Tunisia" concluded ⁽⁶¹⁾. Indeed, the availability of merchant ships was not still so poor from arouse apprehensions and of sunken ships, only 18 ships or tankers for a total of 54,300 tons were lost during the Libya supplies ⁽⁶²⁾.

In the light of these considerations, on April 27 Guzzoni held a new meeting. First hammer Malta was key: bombardment was needed daily, overcoming any difficulties and preventing the transfer of X *Fliegerkorps* from Sicily determined continuity solutions. The second important point concerned the German intention to send Northern Africa other armored units. On the basis of the possibilities of transport and unloading ports, one had to conclude that *"despite the most optimistic calculations, it will be almost impossible to bring in the necessary means for the big action in the Delta."* So had asked Mussolini permission to ask the Germans, through von Rintelen, the availability of Tunis and Bisena, which would have greatly increased the safety of routes. Adm. Riccardi, of course, expressed full and convinced to join the initiative, but held to clarify that the routes of Tunis and Bisena were subjected to offensive starting from Malta, then, given the number of ships that can be used for the escort service, we had to wait to be able to provide the protection of convoys started simultaneously in two place. The reference to *"big action"* towards Egypt stemmed from ideas on which the Supreme Command was dwelling with interest and when Roatta reported that Rommel was able to reach the Delta, so that he could have two armored divisions, Guzzoni intervened:

"(...) You must, at all costs, in order to arrive at the battle of the Delta with at least 12 divisions. Another four must of course be lost along the road and you will have to maintain in Tripolitania the strength necessary to avoid surprises (...)". ⁽⁶³⁾.

You will return to the topic, just for the moment to note that while in Rome there was talk of an "army of Africa" and the Canal, and in Berlin, there was by no means embark on ambitious projects judged and diversions, however, in relation to Operation *Barbarossa*. Ideal for the OKW was to create in Libya a "stalemate" situation, so you won't be forced to face

massively the problem of supplies across the Mediterranean. Less effort to help Rommel meant maximum effort-this was always the Central reasoning point-for the upcoming Russian front.

The April 29 Guzzoni summoned von Rintelen and formally charged him to envisage the OKW to operate ports in Tunisia, as the only way out to increase the volume of traffic directed at North Africa. It is true that it would be reduced substantially undermined maritime path at the expense of an even longer journey on land, however simply conditions of greater safety induced to insist on Tunis and Bizerte. In Berlin it was unwelcome. Already in February, before leaving for Italy, Rommel insisted with the Reich Foreign Minister, Ribbentrop, in favour of the Tunisian solution. The other had argued that such action was premature: it was to avoid difficulties with the French and "*does not play Italy's game*", He put a hold on Tunis and maybe on all North Africa: "*Taken the Italians in Tunis would alienate all the French of goodwill and compromise the German foreign policy in the West.*" In the same interview, Ribbentrop had stated that he does not consider important the possession of Malta, because, in the opinion of the OKW, it was enough to neutralize the island with aviation. The ideas were not changed and on May 5 von Rintelen signaled to Guzzoni that the Government of the Reich could not access the "*request because they were too severe complications that would be derived from a French rejection*" ⁽⁶⁴⁾. Guzzoni insisted then that access to Tunis was not only absolutely necessary for the supply of the vital North African Theater, but also urgent, taking into account the short time needed for the Organization of the new transport system until the Tripolina frontier. In his view, the conquest of Crete and the hoped-for resumption of Tobruk could substantially improve the situation because for the limited availability of cargo ships, only the distinct reduction of trip term -could make a real steamship increased flow of supplies. And added:

"There would be a different solution, involving the German command: one that is attacking the Delta from the East, after having crossed Turkey and occupied Cyprus, but, even if sufficient 10 divisions for operations in the Delta, we still carry in Libya 5-6 divisions, calculating that 3-4 divisions should be left behind,

along the coast. And since the transport of these 5-6 divisions could not be carried out for September, also in this case there should be some new element, which would facilitate the solution of transport”.

Rintelen dropped hints about the possibility of a joint German-Italian operation on Malta, but Guzzoni replied that to believe it was very difficult for the narrowness of the island, battered by the winds, and its defenses in the cave. Then commented: "*If, however, exclude the possibility of dealing with France to Tunis, Malta you should try. Otherwise you have to give up to March on Delta from the West*". Guzzoni was unaware of the background that had led to the German decision to occupy Crete. When the victorious end of Balkan campaign loomed imminently, Gen. Jodi commissioned the OKW, apparently on the orders of Hitler, whether from a strategic point of view was more appropriate to take possession of Crete or Malta. The judgment of the OKW was conducive to Malta, but Hitler went on to ascribe more value in Crete, thanks largely to the intervention of Gen. Student, Commander of the XI *Fliegerkorps*. Who had relayed to Goering the plan for the conquest of the island of Crete with the airborne forces. On 20 April convened in Berlin by the Commander-in-Chief of the *Luftwaffe*, the next day was received by Hitler, which after listening attentively observed: "*it looks great, but I don't think it is feasible*" ⁽⁶⁵⁾. However eventually became convinced, then Student

"I proposed to be followed [the plan for Crete]-recounted later-take possession of Cyprus by air, then make another leap on the Suez Canal. Hitler did not seemed opposed to the project, but refused to commit himself definitively; his mind was then on making arrangements for the upcoming invasion of Russia (...)" ⁽⁶⁶⁾.

On 25 April, Hitler issued Directive No. 28, in which the goal of Crete was necessary "*as defined based on aerial war against Great Britain in the Eastern Mediterranean.*"

NOTE TO CHAPTER 3.

- (1) E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 38.
- (2) On the map 1:100,000 scale is referred to as Ras el-Medauar. In the same paper the *Wadi* and Hagiag es- Sehel are called es-Sahal.
- (3) I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 36.
- (4) According to Playfair remained at Tobruk the 3rd Armored Brigade on an armored car Regiment, two regiments of mixed light and medium tanks and infantry tanks (op. cited p. 37). In fact, according to H.F. JOSLEN (BASS) (Orders of Battle, vol. I, HMSO, London, 1960, p. 151-152), the remains of the Brigade embarked for Egypt on 14 April and in Tobruk, with other personnel, was formed the 1st Armored training Brigade which included, at least initially, the 1st *Royal Tanks*, consisting of light tanks and *cruisers*, and a squadron of the 7th *Royal Tanks* equipped with *Matilda*. The 3rd Armored Brigade is reconstructed in Tobruk on June 6.
- (5) For the XX Corps can calculate a quarter of service personnel, for the 6th Australian a third.
- (6) To keep in mind that part of the heavy armament captured in January was used by the British garrison.
- (7) Letter from Churchill to Roosevelt on 13 April (W. CHURCHILL, op. cited, p. 244).
- (8) ROOSEVELT and CHURCHILL, secret war Correspondence, Mondadori, Milano 1977, p. 165.
- (9) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 244.
- (10) E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 41.
- (11) According to British sources the 5th Panzer Regiment did not reached the junction but halted long before. The carcasses of tanks the Germans found on June 20, 1942 when Tobruk fell, had been transported there by the enemy as a target for training British anti-tank pieces.
- (12) E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 41.
- (13) *ibid.*, p. 42.
- (14) *ibid.*, p. 43.
- (15) "To the South West of Gasr el-Glecha they [the Ariete] were hit by several spreads of artillery from Tobruk. The confusion was enormous. The Division broke and went back in disarray towards radiating South and Southwest. The Commander, General Baldassarre, who had explored the land along with me during the sudden fire, in great fatigue: while down at night, take his Division and lead it, the stipulated position tasks" (E. ROMMEL, op. cited, p. 43). Even on the assumption, but it was not so that all units had fallen into panic, it was not the entire Division, but simply his own part. There is a difference. It is to be observed that it is frequent in Rommel's appeal, *breviter*, to quote the whole for the part

- (16) The *Trento* Mot. Div. consisted of: Division Command, 61st Infantry Reg. (two battalions and one company mortars from 81); 62nd Infantry Reg. (as the 61st); 7th Bersaglieri Reg. (with the VII, X and XI air transportable battalions); 46th. artillery Reg (with two groups of 75/27, one from 100/17 and two 20 mm); 102nd, 104th and 106th company 47/32 guns; DLI machine-gun battalion*, XLI mixed engineer battalion; service units. In total, approximately 10,500 men.
- (17) Earlier on Gen. Streich-had told Major. Ehlers, operations officer of the DAK: "*it may be that Mr. General Rommel not hear it, but it is my duty, as an officer of the highest rank after his, noting that, if the British had a bit of initiative, could leave their forts and burst through the gap, not only making the rest of my Division. But even seizing the headquarters of the Afrikakorps and my command would have been the end of the German presence in Libya and Mr. General reputation. Could you please be so kind to report it, later, Mr. General*". On the other hand Count von Schwerin said: "*to do so [the new attack] would pass over my corpse*". (D. IRVING, op. cited, p. 101).
- (18) DSCSAS, 14.4.1941 date. German evening release is transmitted to the Comando Superiore in English translation edited by command of the *Afrikakorps*.
- (19) According to reports presented, the II/61st infantry would come a short distance from Fort Pilastrino and the I/61st reached the junction of q. 187 North of Ras Medauuar. Without any doubt the good faith of the reports, the analysis of the attack suggests that the penetration was far more contained. Evidently it was difficult to identify relevant on that ground and in full fighting the odds and the locations of topographic maps used. Moreover, even the day before the 5th *Panzerregiment* said to be come up to the height of the Fort Saleh while, according to the enemy, the infiltration of the tanks would be considerably more modest.
- (20) The Battalion had 24 deaths, 112 injured and 436 prisoners.
- (21) According to Rommel the I/32 tank put into gear at 17:00 "*towards q. 187 near Ras el-Medauua*". Don't you understand what hill this can be: q. 187 is located northeast of Ras el-Medauuar, another is to the Southeast, both within the defensive belt. Maybe to q. 197, southwest of the position, outside the perimeter of the fort. The tank unit advanced recklessly until the top of the Hill, fell immediately under enemy fire and stationed himself inside out of order (E. ROMMEL, op. cited, p. 44). Not a word about the action of the I/62nd nor on German competition.
- (22) To hear Rommel, the advance of the Italian tanks was carried out on the initiative, without waiting for the establishment of the fire and the departure of the Fusiliers; According to, the head of the G.S. of the *Ariete*, the order was given to attack by Rommel himself (GIUSEPPE RIZZO, *Buche e croci nel deserto*, ed. Aurora, Verona 1969, p. 99).
- (23) E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 47. At 17:00 evening, the Commander of the DAK noted in his diary: "*we have a hard job the British firmly held Tobruk and have placed well. We cannot trust completely of our allies in combat*", ...
- (24) Landed at Tripoli on April 10.
- (25) Rommel had no tone to complain over the Libyan coast from the English. In the nights on 10 and 11 April the British gunboats *Aphis* and *Gnat* had repeatedly opened fired on vehicles in and around Bomba and the airport of Airi

*DLI Machine gun battalion is most likely a typo for XLI or (551 vs 41)

El Gazala. In the night on the 12th a raid of six destroyers protected by the cruisers *Orion*, *Ajax* and *Perth* had swept the West coast of Cyrenaica. The 13th the destroyers *Stuart Greiffin* and the gunboat *Gnat* and were that British action in the area of Salum; the 15th the Cruiser *Gloucester* and the destroyer *Hasty* had shelled Bardia and fort Capuzzo and the gunboat *Ladybird* the airport of Ain el-Gazala. the 19th, a new bombardment from part of *Gloucester* against the Bardia area.

Finally, in the night on 20th, landing ship *Glengyle*, escorted by the Cruiser *Conventry*, and three destroyers, landed on four sections of the beach West of Bardia a battalion of Special Services. The operation, which had been postponed several times due to bad weather, ended badly: the loss of three officers and non-commissioned officers and 56 men of troop and no concrete result.

(26) DSCSAS, 21.4.1941 date.

(27) DSCSAS, f. 208/41 Segr. 21.4.1941 date of DAK.

(28) One of the most serious episodes will take place early may in the area of Marsa Belafarid, in front of Tobruk, and the Arab reaction will cause the death of an officer and two soldiers and injuring six soldiers of the 61st infantry.

(29) DSCSAS, f. 6201 01/op. 16.4.1941 date of the Comando Superiore.

(30) DSCSAS, f. 212/41 Segr. 23.4.1941 date of DAK/annex 4. The threat of referral to the Court was lacking in Military-base, since the agreements established in his time, in administrative and disciplinary field the Italians depended entirely and exclusively by the Comando Superiore.

(31) Gen. Baldassare also criticized a little by little employment of the Division. At the moment, the face of the large unit-about 14 kilometers-was held with two bersaglieri companies and all pieces available, from gunner from 20 mm to 105 cannons, that no one had the front screen. The situation was such that he had also used light and medium tanks inefficient as centers of fire.

(32) on 21 April at 15, Rommel had held division commanders report announcing that the next attack would be launched between 8-10 days with great Aviation co-operation. He also sketched the plan for the first phase to reach an intermediate objective within defensive lines, so as to secure the total conquest of the fort: the 5th Light was sticking between the via Balbia and the road to el-Adem; the 15th Armored, with all units, including those already driven to Bardia-Salum, was to penetrate from West to East, up to about two miles from the former Post, having strong to its right the *Ariete* and to the left the *Brescia*.

Streich pointed out that according to a survey made by himself the land South-East of Tobruk was flat and it was working to advance rapidly, at night, the infantry behind the barbed-wire fences, but Rommel would have replied curtly: "*I have no need of his ideas. I just want you to tell me how he intends put into effect my plan*". (D. IRVING, op cited, p. 105),

(33) DSCSAS, (f), 01/6655 op. 24.4.1941 date of top commander.

(34) Annex 5, Report

(35) In this respect, the 32nd tank commander, Col. Brunetti, wrote: "*The M 13 tanks must all have a radio is a necessity which imposes from time and is criminal still sending to war these vehicles without radios. If the factories*

- Italian radios worked separately for the Armed Forces, the tank would today their wagons connected among themselves and would be solved one of the most serious armored personnel carriers problems. All German tanks, French, English, are fitted with radio and combat are materially and spiritually United. I tried various radio equipment for tanks (from 1936 to date): it's strange, not to say guilty, that even today the Italian tank is lacking.* (DSCSAS, f ' .450/op dated 21, 4.1941 32 command infantry or tank).
- (36) It should be noted that even Rommel saw fine the randomness of its position. On the evening of 24 April, in fact, had reported to the OKW that the situation on the border was serious, "*with a loss or an encirclement of Bardia-Salum you should abandon the battle of Tobruk, as would a defense forces on both Sides*". (DSCSAS, tele 24.4.1941 date of DAK).
- (37) W. CHURCHILL., op. cited above, pp. 245-247.
- (38) *ibid.*, p. 248.
- (39) A. B. CUNNINGHAM, op. cited above, p. 193-197.
- (40) W. CHURCHILL., op. cited above, p. 277-278, Churchill, at this point, you put in the epistolary dialogue with a long personal letter to Cunningham, where on the one hand held to explain the reasons for that were the basis of the proposals and the choices of the Defense Committee and, on the other hand, wanted to put the points on the: "*as for your thesis of bombing, you should get accurate information, because without them we cannot make any judgment (...)*". The general distribution of forces in theatres of operation is the responsibility of the Defense Committee chaired by me (, etc.). Cunningham did not respond: "*we were too busy with other commitments*". (A.B. CUNNINGHAM, op cited, p, 205),
- (41) A.B. CUNNINGHAM, op. cited, p, 207. Indeed, Churchill did not neglected any Middle Eastern aviation. On 5 April he wrote to the Chief of staff of the Royal Air Force:
- "Two things I feel are incredible. "*
- 1° Which with 26,600 men and 1.175 pilots and 1,044 aircraft charge we can deploy only 292 aircraft against the enemy.*
- 2° That with all the personnel and all older model planes he has, the air Commander in Chief cannot find the men needed to deal with new aircraft when they arrive (...)"* (W. CHURCHILL, op. cited, p. 461),
- But in addition to supply of material, the United States were expanding their incomparable help. Early may on Gen. Henry Arnold, Chief of staff of the U. S. Air Force, will provide the Royal Air Force with British students cover a third of the places of training courses for pilots in the United States, the first 500 British students will leave in mid-May.
- (42) Churchill seemed that "*this work of repairs, which is very serious, both direct and overly overlooked paint*", in fact, according to data available, after the conquest of Cyrenaica had been sent in the workshops in Egypt at least 114 cruisers and 48 Matilda, of these 142 was expected to 40 tanks were repaired in the first fortnight of May and the second fortnight: too little, to his judgment (letter to Sir John Dill on April 18, w. CHURCHILL, op. cited, p. 466),
- (43) The assessment was excessive, The 15th *Panzerdivision* had only tank two battalions, instead of three or four, Then 168 tanks and 30 armored cars, even the French and Swiss information services attributed to 15th Arm, Div, 488 wagons, 122 of those heavy

- (44) The cruisers Mark IV were equal to Pzkw Mk III (or 13), apart from a 30 mm of amour on the turret and the front plate. The cruisers Mark VI or Crusader I, 19 tons, were armed with two machine guns from 7.92 and a 2 pounds piece, had a maximum amour of 40 mm, 180 km range and a maximum road speed of about 40 km/h.
- (45) Churchill had absolutely not “digested” the reports from Cairo of the 7th Armored Division after the battle of Beda Fomm. The 18 April wrote to Sir John Dill criticizing "short-sighted" Act to make the Division 650 kilometers and completed the attrition of tank's tracks when you already knew the landing of German elements. It was not possible that all tanks they need major repairs, much wiser would be set up in Cyrenaica workshops can perform minor repairs (W, Churchill, op. cited, p. 466).
- (46) W. CHURCHILL, op cited, pp. 284-285.
- (47) J. CONNELL, op. cited, p. 426.
- (48) The garrison of Crete was formed from the New Zealand Division, the 19th Australian Brigade, the 14th British Brigade and various units, with six Hurricanes and fifteen aircraft of obsolete type.
- (49) G. S., op cited, p. 75.
- (50) The Unit Santamaria consisted of a machine-gun company, a company of the V battalion light tanks of the *Pavia* Inf. Div. two platoons 47/32 guns, a section from 20 mm, a platoon Sappers and two batteries of 75/27.
- (51) Will be used instead the 61st infantry, the II battalion, strengthened.
- (52) “*Though you should not communicate to your personnel that this is a factious maneuver*” prescribed for Rommel secrecy.
- (53) DSCSAS, f. 230/41 date 27, 4.1941 of DAK, with chronological plan.
- (54) Were the following units of the Division: 15th motorcycle battalion, the I/104th infantry battalion, the I and II Battalion of 115th infantry, a company of 8th *Panzerregiment*, 33rd *Panzerjaeger* group. Fire support was provided by II/33rd German anti-aircraft artillery, and XV/16th Corps artillery grouping and by the I/46th *Trento* artillery.
- (55) The share (KG) was formed by the following unit: Command 200th machine-gun Regiment, 2nd Armored Division battalion machine-gun, Hohmann (part efficient tank grouping of the 5th light), 39th and 605th *Panzerjaeger* group. Fire support was provided by II/2nd rapid artillery, from XLIV/16th grouping Corps artillery and by I/33rd German anti-aircraft artillery.
- (56) Under the command of Col. Cafiero, was made up of the 20th infantry, (less the II Battalion), two companies from 81 mortars, a company of sappers, two accompanying battery 65/17, by three companies from 47/32, a 20. Fire-support was given from II/2nd fast and two groups from 105/28
- (57) Under the command of Col. Brunetti (32nd tank infantry), was formed from the 5th/IX bersaglieri, III/32nd tank (with a training company of the I Bn. and a II Bn and three M 13 tanks), 3rd sappers company, two companies 47/32 guns and three 20 sections. In the follow-on Santamaria.

- (58) G. RIZZO, op. cited above, p. 117.
- (59) see LUIGI GROSSO, *I porti della Libia ed il Genio Militare nelle operazioni del 1941-1942*, in *Bollettino dell'Istituto storico e di cultura dell'Arma del Genio*, Rome, January 1951.
- (60) ALBERTO SANTONI and FRANCESCO MATTESINI, *partecipazione tedesca alla guerra aeronavale nel Mediterraneo (1940-1945)*, ed. Ateneo and Gonzo, Rome; 1980, p. 62.
- (61) A. COCCHIA, t *La guerra nel Mediterraneo. La difesa del traffico con l'A.S. dal 10 giugno 1940 al 30 settembre 1941* -USM-Rome 1958, p. 126-128.
- (62) In respect of personnel and material transported, only 2.9% of the total had been lost.
- (63) DSCS, minutes of the session. Incidentally, from the verbal seems to be inferred that Mussolini had mooted the idea of recapturing the Empire "only by you" to "and "employing many paratroopers". Of course, neither is the case lingered to criticize a design like that.
- (64) One should not think that Germany has ignored the *tout court* Italian desire to take advantage to ask the Tunisians. In fact, for some time had been initiated approaches with the Vichy Government. And also true that negotiations were literally dragging, however on 27 March, France had agreed to the port of Bisena available to the axis. In return, the Germans would have authorized certain troop movements.
- (65) BASIL H. LIDDELL HART, *Storia di una sconfitta*, 3 ed., Rizzoli, Milan, 1972, p. 274.
- (66) *ibid.*, p. 278

Chapter Four

THE BATTLES ON THE SOLLUM FRONT

1. Operation Brevity (15-18 May 1941).

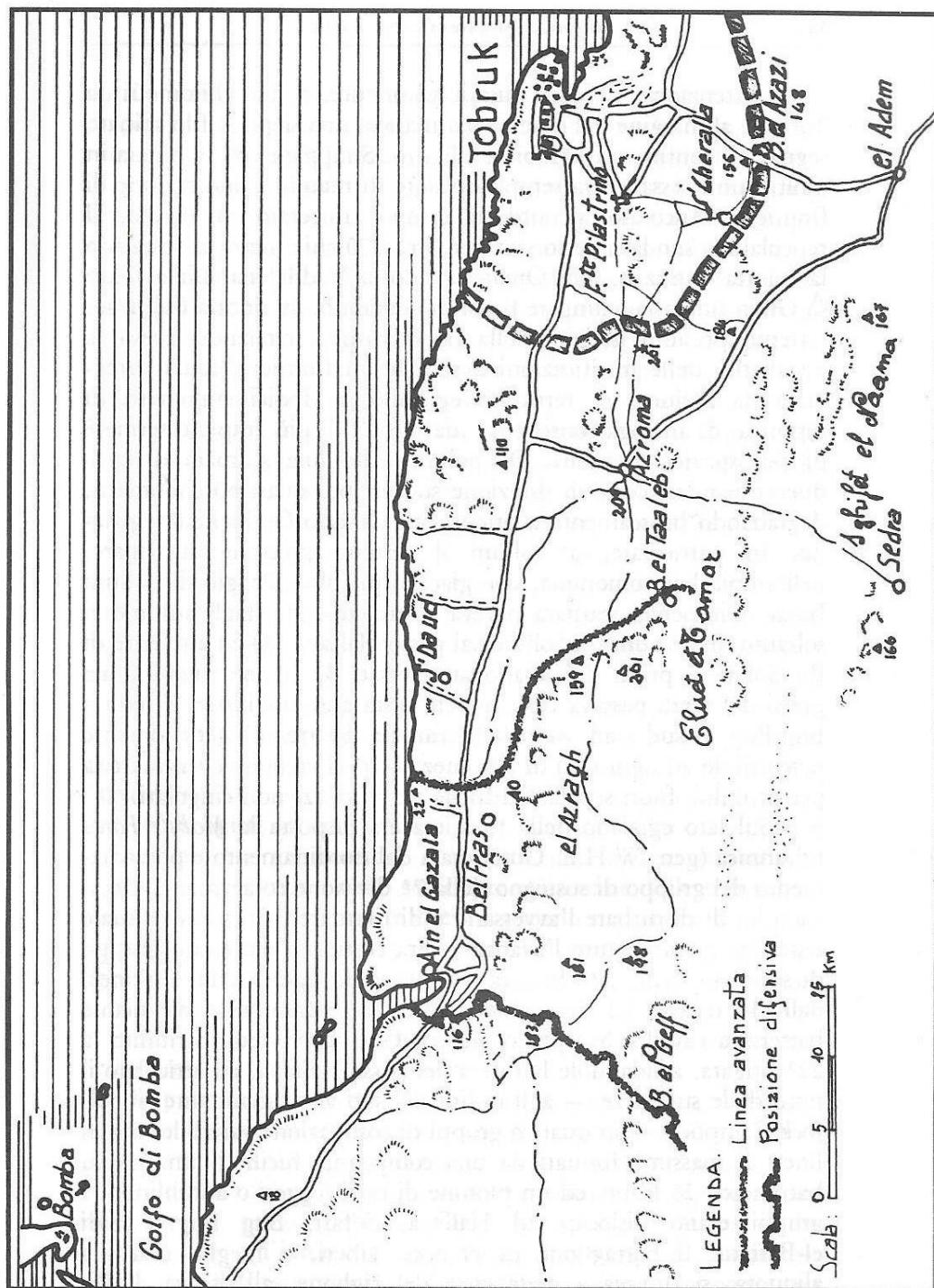
The abandonment of any idea, at least temporarily, to capture Tobruk with a gesture of force led to acceptance of a state of siege of the fort, characterized by artillery duels, clash of combat patrols, excavation for “silt up” as much as possible. But Paulus had spoken clearly and Rommel was forced to recognize the validity of the hypothesis shown: it was plausible that a British success against advanced deployment of Bardia-Sollum could result in the impossibility to continue the blockade of Tobruk and the need to defend themselves in open field. Then, it became an elementary precaution finding a location west of Tobruk for use in case more unlucky. Gariboldi was fully agreement and set back was quickly recognized: among those possible, the area of Gazala he was working with relative ease to a defense in place and this was enough to accept it. It consisted of a line and a leading position (sketch No. 20). The first ran for about ten kilometers west of Acroma and had the basic function of ensuring the time for regular occupation of the main position. Faced with a massive enemy attack its defenders had to withdraw. The main position from hill 208 (about twenty kilometers southwest of Gazala) northeast; drew then parallel to the via Balbia, along the Ridge, and after a couple of kilometers down towards the deep bay of Gazala. The Comando Superiore put 850 workers at work immediately and in mid-May the position was being set up ⁽¹⁾.

Rommel, however, did not give much satisfaction to Paulus. In communicating to the OKW conducted reconnaissance to Gazala, specified): *“will be required to send Supercomando N.A. an Infantry Division to occupy it. So deep are all possible and necessary measures. The troops will be withdrawn from Bardia and Tobruk only in case of extreme necessity. A retreat of one hundred kilometers would not be a decisive improvement in the situation of supplies”* ⁽²⁾.

. The choice defensive position west of Tobruk

LA POSIZIONE DIFENSIVA SCELTA AD OVEST DI TOBRUK

Schizzo n. 20



The focus moved to the East. At 120 km from Tobruk, on the edge of the Marmarico desert, a barbed-wire fence marking the border between Libya and Egypt. Torn and fizzled out in many places, it had simple indication of material value frontier. Anchored in the North to the entrenched camp of Bardia, the reticulated ran southwards for about 270 kilometers, winding fort Capuzzo, Sidi Omar, fort Maddalena, Bir el-Garn el Grein until reaching the oasis of Giarabub. The fort Campbell, extreme Italian garrison of coastal Cyrenaica, had the peculiarity of the desert frontier fortifications. It was fronted by Sollum, Egyptian territory, twelve miles away, of similar consistency but provided more extensive barracks and larger depots. From Sollum to the High Escarpment about two hundred meters runs Southeast for nearly 60 kilometers, degrading abruptly to the East on the Western Egyptian Desert. In particular, at Sollum Alta rushed to the sea, in the homonymous bay, where lies the small village of Sollum Bassa. The rugged Escarpment could be overtaken by trucks only in three steps: to Sollum, Halfaya pass ⁽³⁾ and East of Bir at Sofafi. The first two were crossed by good trails near the third spent a decent roadway directed at Bugs Bug. South and West of the escarpment the soil is usually passable to all types of vehicle; between the ridge and the sea off the road conditions are difficult for non-tracked vehicles.

On the Egyptian side of the border was placed the *Mobile Force* (Gen. W.H.E. Gott), created by the reorganization and strengthening of the support group of the 7th Armored Division. Had the task of disturbing the opponent and to delay any attempt to continue the advance. Consisted of the above cited support group, by the 22nd Guards Brigade (Gen. I. d. Erskine), by the 11th Hussars, by French motorized battalion and some horse batteries. On the tactical plan, Gott had held convened the 22nd Brigade toward the defense of the Halfaya pass, and divide the rest of his forces-his second in command orders, Col. Jock Campbell in four groups of variable but generally formed from a company of riflemen, one or more batteries from 25 pounds and one platoon of light tanks or armored cars. The groups were stationed at Halfaya, at Sofafi, Bug bugs and Sidi Barrani. The Free French battalion, or rather part of it, stood at about half of the Ridge at Bir el-Chreigat.

Disruptive actions were almost immediately started. It was simple bets without specific objectives, but on the evening of 23 April a large group of forces, including three platoons of 11th Hussars, made a *raid* on fort Campbell temporarily interrupting traffic between the Fort and Sidi Azeiz. The attack was repelled, however. Col. von Herff, Commander of the Italian-German troops on the border, sent an alarming report to the command of the *Afrikakorps*. Regardless of the real danger that the foray, the episode was worth to highlight the precariousness of the situation, so the next day, in the report to Rommel OKW, stressed that any loss or even only the encirclement of Bardia- Sollum would force even to desist from the battle of Tobruk, not having sufficient forces to put the defense *aviation reinforcement (especially with combat aircraft) and with the use submarines along the Sollum -Tobruk coast*".

In addition, in the third week of April the competition of various news indicated the influx to Marsa Matruh, large forces and materials from backward areas of the Sudan, Palestine, and Delta; the Libyan border by starting a new armored Division; the arrival in Egypt of air units salvaged from East Africa and of which was already noticeable in the intense activity that was manifested in the theater of operations. The set of indicators prompted the S.I.M. evidence that the opponent will propose in the near future to launch an offensive ⁽⁴⁾. The systematic bombing of Tripoli's port facilities, intended apparently to hinder our landing operations, and the intensified activities in the Strait of Sicily against maritime traffic towards Libya it sang perfectly to this hypothesis.

In part to stave off the threat, in part to exert pressure in order to divert attention from the imminent British attack on Tobruk, on 25 April Col. von Herff launched the 3rd Recon group and 15th Motorcycle battalion on British posts and occupied the Halfaya pass. This was Gort's time to give his opponent an intention that goes beyond concrete possibilities: stationed himself on Bug-Bug at Sofafi, South of the ridge.

On May 10 Wavell gave to Gen. Beresford-Peirse, new

Commander of the *Western Desert Force*, the prime directive: "it is my intention that we launch an *offensive in the Western desert as soon as our resources allow*" and I asked for proposals. Three days later he had to comment:

"As long as we're not forced to mull our availability into the ground and in the air, in the face of offensives on Crete, in Palestine, in Iraq, Cyprus, etc., I see no reason why we cannot enact a real counter-offensive by the end of this month or the beginning of June" ⁽⁵⁾.

But something unexpected happened. The dispatch with which Paulus had described the unfortunate condition of Rommel had been deciphered by *Ultra*, so 7 May Churchill wrote to Wavell who recognized the full right to judge about the operational possibilities exist, however, when the *Tiger* convoy had managed to pass, would be really time to "*Act and dare*". In this respect, indeed, promised him a *Hurricane's* transfer from Malta to Egypt ⁽⁶⁾. Even the Commander in Chief of the Middle East was aware of German communications. Moved by the desire to do something before the arrival of the bulk of the 15th *Panzerdivision* and revamping of the port of Benghazi, the *Premier* replied:

"I have ordered all available tanks are placed at the disposal of Gott for offensive action in the area of Sollum. This is now undergoing intense preparation and should take place shortly. Suspended only if a complete disaster were to hit *Tiger*" ⁽⁷⁾.

Already probing actions, in addition to the usual activities of the artillery, were conducted by the *Mobile Force*: the morning of 8 May, an episode of mechanized elements from the South headed on fort Campbell. Under the impetus, von Herff's troops were forced to abandon the positions of Sidi Suleiman and Sidi Omar, while retaining the most important Halfaya. The next day fighting were hampered by the storm of *ghibli*, however the German mobile forces counterattack to retake the lost towns. Moreover, the attempt of a formation of six *Bren carriers* and four vans with onboard infantry along the hairpin bends of Halfaya pass was soon in front of the fire reaction decided.

The morning of 11 May, at 10:00, Rommel held division commanders report. Premise that the moment tactics crisis was due to shortage of supplies, then spoke of the various fronts. To that of Bardia- Sollum said:

“The enemies activities (...) has increased in recent days but all attacks were always rejected, forcing the enemy to withdraw to settle out and obtain, as a result of serious losses. Probably be repeated attacks by the opponent, who will continue to work on this front to try with an action from outside, from East to West, to resolve the plight of besieged Tobruk.

For our part, the necessary measures to trim down such attacks were already taken by sending significant reinforcements also Germans and Italians. Currently, between Bardia and Sollum, our forces amounted in total to about a Division and are well placed in favorable locations. As a result the enemy, to deal with it, it should have at least three divisions. Therefore, the overall situation can be good, as long as the opponent is kept within the limits of such force and does not receive reinforcements with which to circumvent our positions.

For our part, the conduct of the war will be like the past marked by outspoken defensive maneuvered namely offensive stakes everywhere and always, when possible. In case of attack, the opponent will be pushed forward and then hit him, especially at the side.

As regards the opponent, is aware of the difficulties which he suffers for getting supplies through the vast desert area”.

On the front of Tobruk, Rommel, Staatliche Museen somewhat to bring out the goodness of the measures taken and the need to adopt measures to avoid losses. The enemy was often forced to shoot against the fake artfully constructed stations; now began to make bets with tanks: it was necessary to let them move and strike at short distances, using machine guns to prevent the crews come from boats. In a few days would start our patrols actions of assault. Major divisions, instead, should, in principle, be confined to improving the investment of faux forts, building works, digging trenches and lining up minefields, making a sturdy cornerstones system driven more and more towards the Australian line and support each other, avoiding absolutely a threadlike apparatus and entering the artillery in the strong-points, in order to allow fire to circle around the horizon ⁽⁸⁾.

Already from noon on the 10th it was known that the *Mobile Force* had withdrawn with the bulk on Dar el-Hamra, leaving advanced elements along the coast, at about 20 km southeast of Sollum. In relation to these news, on the 12th Col. von Herff developed an offensive action tending to bypass the units that were in retreat toward Sidi Barrani. The episode went so far as to Bir Habata, on edge, and reached with some patrols the plain below, inflicting the opponent with a few losses, including an entire abandoned artillery battery

by minions. Did not have the character of a proper relief operation, but the interception of electronic exploration company of the *Afrikakorps* gave the feeling at least a “critical” among the English file: “*In fact throughout the morning-* reported the company's no. 12 - intercepted messages contained almost exclusively about the enemy and an operational order suggests that it failed any command-line action (...)”. For they were such that clues emerged suggesting an English move was imminent, the report also said: “*it seems that the enemy should now adopt a new deployment on three combat groups.*” It was true. At 5:30 on May 15 Gen. Gott attacked by surprise with a trident formation.

SITUATION OF BRITISH LARGE UNITS IN EGYPT on May 15, 1941	
According to S.I.M.	Actually (*)
At Tobruk: 9th Australian Inf. Div. 3rd Armored Bd. (remains) Various Support units	9th Australian Inf. Div. 2 nd Armored Bd. (remains) 18 th Australian Inf. Bd. Various Support units
At the border: three mixed brigades	7th Arm Div. Support Group (remains) 22nd Guards Bd. 7th Arm. Bd. (in formation)
At Marsa Matruh-Alexandria: two Inf. Divs. 7th Armored Div. 4 th Indian Inf. Div.	6 th English Div. (only 16th Inf. Bd.) 7th Australian Inf. Div. (less 18th Inf. Bd.) 7 th Arm. Div. (personnel only)
In The Delta: two-three divisions eff. three-two divisions ineff.	Polish Inf. Bd. 6th Australian Inf. Div. (part) New Zealand Div. (part)
(*) Third Dispatch of Gen. Wavell on Operations in the Middle East from February, 7th, 1941 to July, 15th, 1941, quoted.	

On 12 May the *Tiger* convoy, with 82 *cruisers*, 135 *Matilda* and 21 light tanks, reached Alexandria ⁽⁹⁾. But Wavell had already made his decision. Without waiting for the tanks transported by convoy to be ready for combat, he had ordered that Gott, reinforced by what was currently available, attacked in the area of Sollum. If the action was successful, he would have immediately considered a combined operation of Gott and Morshead, from Tobruk, to drive the enemy West of the fort. For the second time, maybe it would have been necessary to wait for at least part of the cargo from *Tiger* was taken over by crew and battle conditions.

The forces assigned to Gen. Gott for operation Brevity was as follows. On the plateau the 22nd Guards Brigade (*II Scots Guards, IX Durham Light Infantry, the III Coldstream Guards*) ⁽¹⁰⁾ reinforced by the *I Buffs* and the 4th *Royal Tanks*, and the 7th Armored Brigade (2nd *Royal Tanks* and three columns of Campbell) ⁽¹¹⁾. In particular starts, the 4th *Royal Tanks* was on two squadrons of 24 *Matilda* each and 2nd *Royal Tanks* on two squadrons of 15 *cruisers* each. On the coastal strip the II battalion of the *Rifle Brigade* reinforced by smaller units.

Information about the Italian-German deployment was comprehensive enough: we knew of the strong point emplaced at Sollum Alta, Halfaya pass, and fort Campbell; we knew that the Germans had 30 or 40 tanks, though it ignored the intentions of von Herff. Most likely there was to expect a battle of encounter. However, Gott was the following: the 22nd Brigade was to seize the Halfaya pass, continue on to fort Capuzzo and bet on Bardia; on the left, the 7th armored brigade was to proceed along the Bir es Scefzeren-Sidi Omar-Sidi Azeiz eliminating any obstacles; on the right, the II Rifle Battalion had the task to prevent the enemy to leave Sollum Bassa, and, subsequently, to occupy Sollum Alta.

The deployment of about 6,000 men, Herff, was based on two cornerstones advanced (at Sollum and Halfaya pass), three central strongholds (Nezuet el-Abeisi, ' Bir Musaid- fort Capuzzo and Bir Hafid) and in the rear (Bardia), with patrols being pushed to Sidi Suleiman and Sidi Omar (sketch No. 21). In hand, an armored reserve held at Bardia. The most important were two: the cornerstone of Halfaya and Bir Musaid-fort Capuzzo. The

first had the heart on hill 191, held by the 2nd German motorcycle company and the Italian 6th 105 battery at the mouth of the pass road and opposite directions from the South. The second is supported at both locations and is paid as a pin for counter-attacks by armored units. Nobody was protected from the barbed wire or minefields; the stone walls were the soft defense bastions.

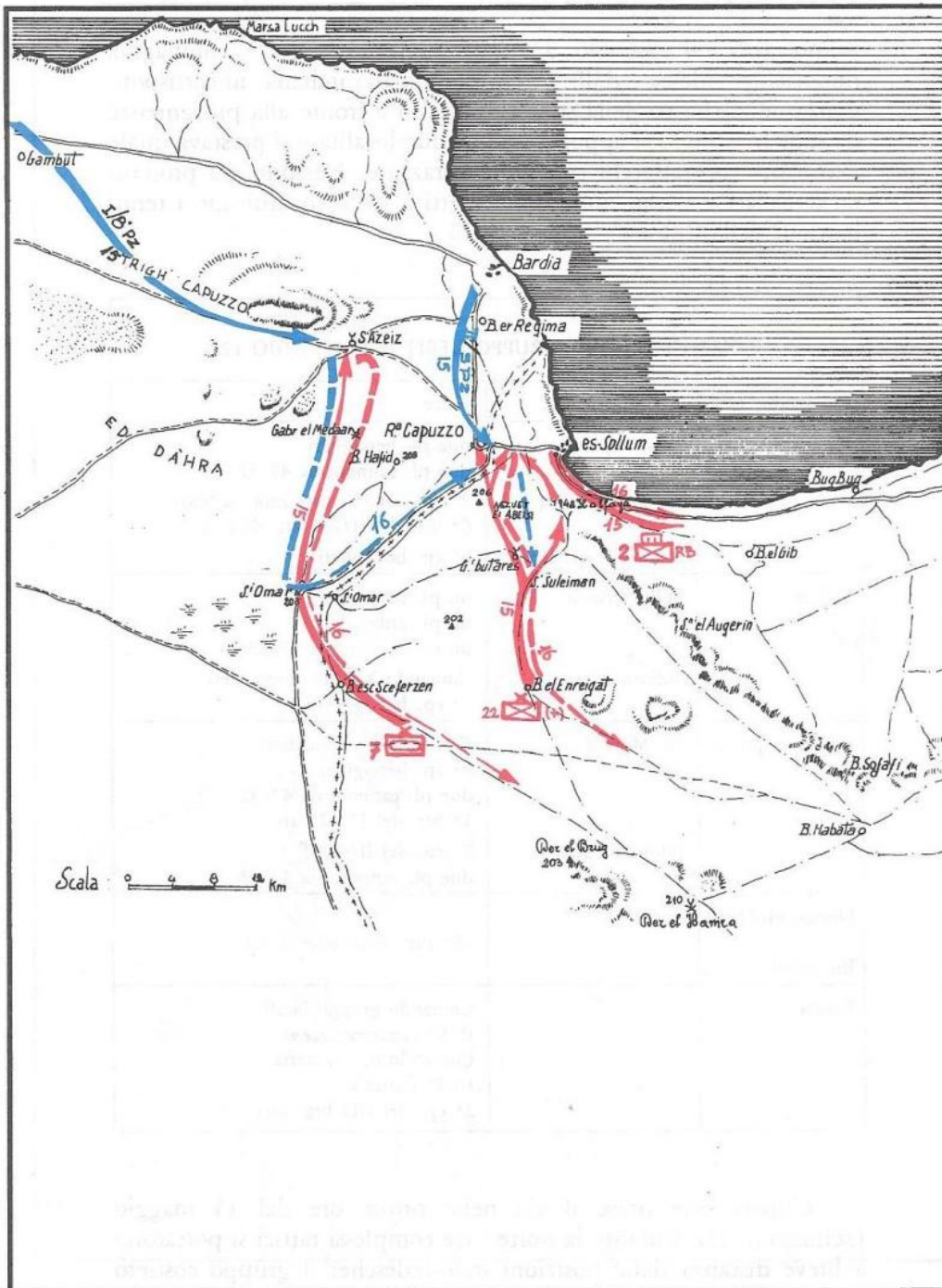
THE DEPLOYMENT OF HERFF GROUP ON 15 MAY 1941		
Stronghold	Articulation	Forces
Halfaya	towards the pass on the plateau, to hill 191 North of hill 191	two pl. Bersaglieri two pl. 47/32 guns 2 nd co. of the 15 th . Mot. bd German 6 th bn. of the II/24 th n. by C.A. 6 th co. Bersaglieri
Sollum	Sollum Bassa Sollum Alta	a pl. Bersaglieri a pl. Arditi a pl. 47/32 guns Command XII bn. Bersaglieri 7th co. Bersaglieri (-)
Fort Capuzzo	Bir Musaid Fort Capuzzo	Command 8th bersaglieri 2nd co. Bersaglieri (+) two pl. 47/32 guns 1 st bn. of I/132 nd art. 7th co. 2nd/62 nd Inf. two pl. 47/32 guns
Nezuet el-Abeisi		15 th bn. MOT. German (-)
Bir Hafid		
Bardia		Herff Group Command II/5 th <i>PanzerRegiment</i> 62 nd infantry command I/61 st infantry 2 nd co. the DLI bn. MTR

The operation started in the early hours of 15 May (sketch No. 22). During the night the three tactical complexes moved to a short distance from the German-Italian locations: the coastal group

The operation Brevity (15-17 May 1941)

L'OPERAZIONE BREVITY (15-17 maggio 1941)

Schizzo n. 22



in front of Sollum Bassa and Halfaya pass; the two brigades on the escarpment, roughly the height of Bir el-Chreigat. Dawn moved to the attack, while the fighter patrols of no. 274 of the *Royal Air Force* alternated flying over the moving column. The guards followed the track of Bir el-Chreigat up to Sidi Suleiman, then The *Scots Guards* with C squadron of 4th *Royal Tanks* attacked on Halfaya, his first goal, while the 2nd *Durham Light Infantry* with A Squadron headed for the fort Capuzzo. The 7th armored brigade turned off, for the desert, Sidi Omar: Sidi Azeiz was heading on to cut off the retreat route of the Herff KG.

There was artillery preparation to better ensure the surprise. The British batteries opened supportive fire immediately. The first came at 8th bersaglieri Command, Bir, Musaid from the strongpoint of Halfaya. Was the battery Commander of 105 to say: “*Pronounced enemy attack armored vehicles against the German company has abandoned positions. Single piece efficiently, fired seven or eight shots, ceased fire because unusable*”⁽¹²⁾. Were the 6th. All of a sudden the 6th bersaglieri company deployed north of hill 191 and advanced group pushed the pace found themselves isolated, to fight each on their own. The 6th company saw artillery shots arrive and then the *Matilda*. Made the first and left bring seconds up to 400 meters, safe stopping with cannons from 47. Had the same desolate experience that met the divisions jokes in Sidi Barrani, Bardia and Tobruk a few months before: the grenades hit the armor, but splashed away according to crazed trajectories and the tanks continued to advance, slow and invulnerable.

Passed the initial bewilderment, the quick shot anti-tank guns were directed at tracks and this time, some *Matilda* were immobilized. Others found shelter within a thousand meters. But it was only the first one. The second was taken from two different directions, with the *Scots* in the wake of the tanks. At 09:30, after three hours of desperate fighting, the 6th bersaglieri company was destroyed. Around and about his positions there were seven *Matilda* destroyed or immobilized⁽¹³⁾. Remained the advanced forces, towards the pass. Attacked from above, behind, by guards and items from below, from the coastal plain, from a company of riflemen, he gave hard although from time to time bombarded by eight Blenheim, cannonade by 25 pounds guns, made a sign to the tank of fire submachine guns. At 17:45 its remains surrendered⁽¹⁴⁾.

Meanwhile, the IX *Durham Light Infantry* with A squadron of *Matilda* had passed without much difficulty the German stronghold of Nezuat el-Abeisi and headed toward that of Bir Musaid- Fort Capuzzo. At 07:30 we started the fight, but now there was more surprise. also intervened the German 3rd Recon group, kept in a sectoral reserve. American anti-tank cannons, all from 37 and 47, had to fire to 300-400 meters, aiming at the tanks tracks; they had added 75 pieces, to whose shells the minions had been removed the primer to cut through the armor of tanks at short distances. Nine *Matilda* were immobilized because the affected tracks or at the seam of the turret. Only two of them managed to get in with the *Durham*. The possession was also short-lived.

The first information sent by von Herff in command of the *Afrikakorps* caused alarm: he was unaware of the extent of the task begun by the British and it was feared to be a big attempt to break the siege of Tobruk. As a result Rommel ordered some elements from encirclement of the fort and ordered the I/8th *PanzerRegiment* to head immediately to Sidi Azeiz with a battery of 88s. Meanwhile, however, von Herff did not remain inert. Took the II/5th *Panzer* and headed at full speed toward fort Capuzzo. The battalion moved slightly toward the desert and then, from the West, invested with violence the *Durham*. The sudden entry into the field, behind, by four *Matilda* kept lurking by the Commander of the 4th *Royal Tank* failed to prevent the 14th redoubt from being retaken. But affected used anti-tank cannons, destroyed, the resistance became almost unbearable close, especially since even the *Scots Guards*, eliminated much of the cornerstone of the Halfaya field, you were facing Musaid. All of a sudden, around 16:00, inexplicably attackers desisted from stress. Shortly after he arrived Col. Montemurro order a withdraw on Bardia.

Sollum Alta resisted. In the morning, a put a observation post for Sollum Bassa had been placed on the plateau, with the expectation that the British from Halfaya continue on Sollum. This was, in fact, about 11:00 by a platoon of *Matilda* and a *Scottish* company and, within an hour, most of the cornerstone was being overshadowed. Only a small Center of resistance of the 7th bersaglieri company. It would cost little to delete it now, but even here the attack stopped to flow back towards Musaid Bir.

By late afternoon the fighting had stopped. No one had a clear idea about the situation. Von Herff had decided to withdraw the Montemurro column to Bardia and with all German mobile forces resist in the Sidi Azeiz area, waiting for the 8th *Panzer*. Rommel telegraphed to the OKW: “(...) *Bitter, bloody fighting. Maintained Bardza-Sidi Azeiz line (not included). Dawn attack will be made to restore the situation. If this fails, you should abandon siege of Tobruk, also considering the supply crisis*”⁽¹⁵⁾. Gott was even more puzzled. The action of the guards Brigade had broken was not entirely a result of the hardness of a fighting chance. On the left, after passing at dawn the border wire, the 7th armored brigade had at conducted towards Sidi Azeiz. It soon encountered a German patrol, then an armored formation. The impact was short but intense. Eventually the Brigade saw fit fall back toward the border. So the British unit locations on the evening of the 15th was approximately as follows. In the area of Musaid-Capuzzo 9th *Durham* and the 2nd *Scots Guards* with 4th *Royal Tank*, that had lost only 7 tanks of 24, had just 6 *Matilda* efficient. There were at Halfaya the III *Coldstream Guards*. At Sollum had installed the II battalion of the *Rifle Brigade*. To the East of Sidi Azeiz was the 2nd *Royal Tank*, whose 22 *cruisers* seemed in working order but give little trust in battle for trouble of mechanical character.

Ultimately, if von Herff was unaware of the true extent of the English effort, Gott knew her very well and had many good reasons for fearing that the guards Brigade, in open terrain, threatened to be wiped out by a strong counter-attack of German *Panzer*. Therefore, at 21:00, he sent a dispatch to Gen. Beresford-Peirse proposing withdraw on Halfaya pass. The response from the Commander of the Western Desert Force arrived only at 02:45 of the 16th and was not comforting: continue the resistance, the situation would be reviewed in the light of the first reports of aerial reconnaissance. But Gott had already taken its decisions from an hour: the 7th armored brigade had to remain in the rearguard in the vicinity of Sidi Azeiz and the 22nd guards Brigade to concentrate at Halfaya.

The I/8th *Panzer* arrived at Sidi Azeiz at 03:00 of the 16th, unfortunately with empty tanks. Refueling, which took many hours, headed South-East towards Sidi Omar unless he met some. Therefore, left in place a detachment, went up North

along the wire. But von Herff was enough that the news of the arrival of reinforcements pushed the enemy to retreat. In the morning, with eight tanks of the I/8th armored counterattacked to the fort Capuzzo and other mixed forces at Sollum, while Col. Montemurro followed in the second echelon. Summary: at noon fort Capuzzo Musaid had re-occupied, and at 14:00 he was at Sollum and at dusk German armored forces arrested alignment Sidi Omar-Sidi Suleiman- Sollum.

Halfaya pass was adjusting to the *Coldstream* stronghold with a squadron of nine *Matilda*; the bulk of the guards Brigade had withdrawn on Bir Habata and armored brigade was located in the area of Bir el-Chreigat. Operation Brevity had failed, although Halfaya pass remained in English hands.

You should make some brief consideration. It does not appear that the operation was conducted by Gen. Gott with the necessary vigor. Regardless, in fact, the hardness of the clashes, the 15th the English action stopped when he had full preponderance of forces (the 7th armored brigade almost had not been committed), tying the fear of being seen arriving on the battlefield a strong German armored column from Tobruk to energy performance from von Herff in utilization of his II/5th *PanzerRegiment*.

Conversely, if the I/8th *PanzerRegiment*, about 16:00 in Sidi Omar instead of up North on the wire, had attached at the Halfaya area, as will be done in the battle of Sollum by mid-June, would take on the British forces back with probably better results. Certainly influenced the precariousness of communications, uncertainties in the orientation and difficulties of commanders, caught in the vortex of local actions, to perceive with sufficient clarity the extent of direct opponent. It is natural that the assessment of the situation has greatly affected by these negative elements. Hitting a comment by Wavell formulated:

“(...) and we were forced to retreat. The enemy tanks were disinclined to short distance combat and could withdraw with few casualties”⁽¹⁶⁾. You cannot dispute the assertion; the fact is that *Matilda*-because they were the bogeyman of Italians and Germans-almost seemed invulnerable to distances up to 400 meters, not only for pieces mounted on carriages (37/45, 47/32 & 50/60) but also for those who were arming the tanks (47/32 on M 13, 37/45 and 50/42 on pzkw III and 75 /24 on pzkw IV).

And, in this regard, it becomes natural to a comparison: why

Italian units defense against *Matilda* was so effective during the operation *Brevity*, while not as you can tell happened during operation *Compass*? The answer is difficult. Evidently, in mid-May 1941 entered into play factors present to a lesser degree a few months earlier: better supervision of the units, better training, and higher esprit de corps. And even non-existent factors above: any victorious battle, the sense of emulation with the Germans, knowing that you have tank (Germans) able to fight with those Englishmen,... trust in Rommel. The Commander of the *Afrikakorps*, in fact, was already among the units of great prestige. The lower of the commanders at the highest level; even at home. Mar. von Brauchitsch, evidently disconcerted about the tone of the dispatches sent to the OKW during the battle, the May 25 will send a long telegram to Rommel, saying, among other things: "*you should avoid relationships too pessimistic or too optimistic under the immediate influence of the events*"⁽¹⁷⁾.

For the Montemurro column, worth restoring as highlighted in the report sent by Col. von Herff to Rommel:

"I detect in a special way the behavior of all units of the Montemurro column. Since this Regiment is to my additions I formed a good impression of this troop, as well as Italian Frongia unit⁽¹⁸⁾.

Both units fought wonderfully in serious fighting on 15 may (...).

The company deployed to hill 191 fought with the 2nd sub-machine gun company until being completely encircled by British tanks.

The company that held the position of Sollum and coastal has fought depression from 05:30 in the morning until 18:00 in the evening and only when it had fallen Italian officers, exhausted all the ammo and grenades, combat has ceased. Part of the company, at Sollum, completely surrounded, held firm until the onset of darkness, and then force the encirclement northwards.

The part of the regiment deployed near Capuzzo, under the personal guidance of Mr. Colonel, repulsed two attacks of tanks supported by English dismounted infantry, making use, in hand-to-hand combat, including hand grenades and resisted for several hours until being liberated from enemy pressure from an onslaught of tanks sent in their rescue, then withdrawing, by orders received, towards Bardia.

The regiment suffered severe and bloody losses and complained numerous deaths, but nonetheless the Colonel asked as soon as cleared up his unit-now reduced to fragments-to be immediately used again in combat.

Even the piece of artillery unit Frongia, located in the position of 2nd sub-machine gun company of Halfaya pass, did fire until a shot scored by a British heavy tank Mark II was destroyed. Your continued to fight with the sub-machine guns.

I feel a duty to report to the German Africa Corps the excellent behavior by these two units of Italian troops.

I proposed the Colonel for the iron cross 1st class”⁽¹⁹⁾.

The casualties amounted to 395 Italian and 258 German, those materials were cumbersome, so began the meticulous recovery of all that could be recovered, it was own means or the opponent. In particular, many Italian artillery pieces stayed at Bardia at the fall of the fort, were called into efficiency workshops of the *Afrikakorps*. Considered outdated, Rommel crisis provided the consolidation of the wire. Therefore the border sent all available forces of the 15th Armored Division are not indispensable for the investment of Tobruk. Dispose of 2nd quick artillery deployed to Bardia (less a group that remained in el-Adem) and asked to command over the reminder sent to Tobruk fire equipment (artillery, anti-tank pieces, gunner from 20) of the *Pavia*.

Wavell sent to Churchill a “un-rosy report” but the *Prime Minister*, on May 17, replied that the results of the operation were satisfactory, since without using the tanks carried by Tiger convoy had passed to the offensive, had occupied Halfaya and Sollum (?), captured 500 German prisoners and inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy. All at a price not too high of 20 infantry tanks and 1000-1500 men and then added that Rommel could not be able to tolerate continuous and bitter actions, so it became necessary to insist in the aggressive attitude both Tobruk and Sollum. “When you feel you can get in on the action the “tiger cub”? concluded. Wavell immediately sought to curb the impatience:

“The enemy has proved stronger than we thought and forced us on the defensive until they come into action the « tiger cub ». This will not happen before the end of the month; It would be even better if they could have an even greater time to Acclimate, but this depends on the situation. The enemy is gathering forces in advanced positions and may try more advanced. “...”⁽²⁰⁾.

The Commander in Chief of the Middle East saw right: Rommel had no intention of letting a «breakout»

dangerous on the edge of Sollum and a few days after the operation *Brevity* ordered von Herff to resume the Halfaya pass. The design included a demo action, waged by the II/5th *Panzer*, a 88 battery and the Italian 2nd rapid artillery to Dar el-Hamra ⁽²¹⁾, and concentric action against the pass. The latter was entrusted to two battle groups: from Sollum, the I/8th *Panzer*, the 15th motorcycle battalion, the 1st company of 33rd Recon group and 33rd German artillery; from the West, the German I/104th light infantry. The air force had to beat concentrations existing opponents Dar el-Hamra, at Sofafi and West of Bug Bug.

The evening of the 26th units approached starting bases. At 04:30 in the morning after the attack began, according to the plan established and 06:15 the pass was in German hands. The rest of the defenders escaped to Sidi Barrani. The loot was remarkable: nine artillery pieces, seven *Matilda* (three of which are in perfect working order) and many trucks. The Halfaya position ensured the outlet in the coastal strip and below, while a valuable item in case of attack, represented a serious obstacle to any British return offensive, as it will occur in the upcoming battle of Sollum, initiated by the enemy on 15 June as operation *Battleaxe*.

2. THE POLITICAL-MILITARY SITUATION

In mid-May 1941 the overall situation around the Mediterranean could be considered slightly in favor of the axis.

In North Africa, as we know, the first British attack on the Sollum had translated into a clear failure and only the resistance of Tobruk was released of the enemy. In Balcania, the annihilation of Yugoslavia and Greece as well as the alignment of Slovenia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria had given Germany a regional compact block from the Baltic Sea to the Aegean and to a position of privilege in the Central-Eastern Mediterranean and only the strength of Malta was the enemy's assets. In the Mediterranean the English fleet was leaning in Gibraltar, Malta, Crete and Alexandria, but was a domain on which actually degraded the axis naval presence from bases in Italy, Greece and the Aegean. In the Middle East, the State of things was being evolving and could turn in favor of one as of the other antagonist: depended a lot from who had clearer ideas.

There were several separate matches to play. The most important was a Cyrenaic theater, but both opponents needed to regroup and strengthen. The more pressing had become Crete. It was the first to be played.

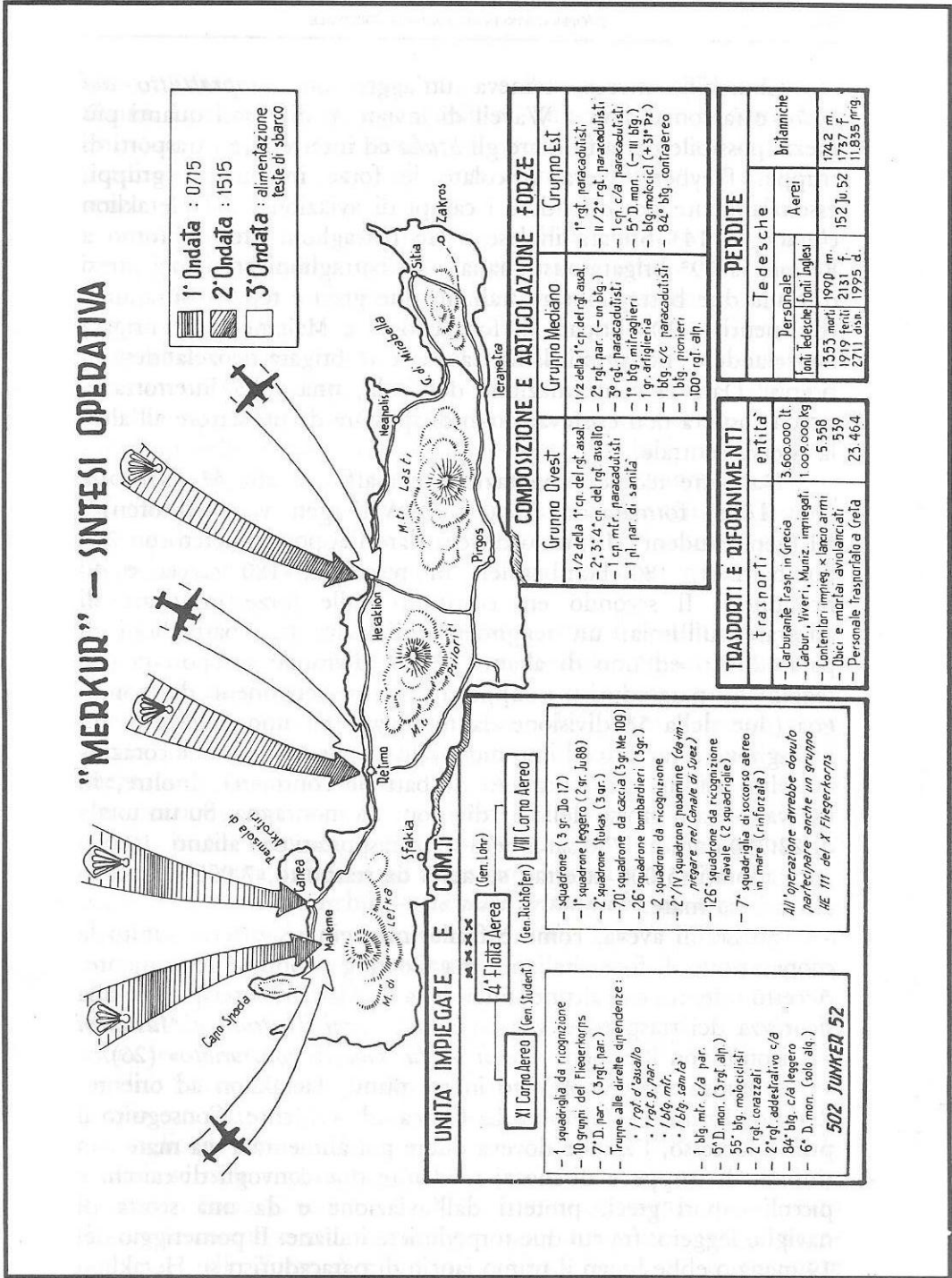
The season began on May 19, from the German side, the operation Merkur, tending to conquer Crete (diagram 23). For assessing the difficulties we must firstly bear in mind the harsh nature of that environment. It is a 240 km long island and wide from 15 to 45 km; totally crossed by a rugged chain whose main peak, Mt. Ida, reaches 2456 meters; crossed by a single road, all along the northern coast, with a development of about 230 kilometers. Only three cross connections, not always passable to vehicles, meeting the above-mentioned costs (from Maleme, Rethymno and Heraklion from) with small towns of the South. At the end of April, after the arrival of the survivors from the Peloponnesus, were on the island, some 28,600 British in part poorly armed ⁽²²⁾, and about 12,000 Greeks (two divisions) ⁽²³⁾. Shortly before the attack had flowed from Alexandria English battalion, six Matilda, 16 light tanks, 18 anti-aircraft pieces and 17 Field pieces, as well as vehicles and various materials. As for *the Royal Air Force*, his effectives in early May included 36 aircraft, not all efficient. The 19th the four *Hurricanes* and three *Gladiator* were vacated in Egypt.

The German attack was intended as a logical consequence of the conquest of Greece and agents of the *Intelligence Service* had provided valuable information in this regard. But an invasion operation was not taken into account, because no precedent. The Gen. Freyberg had never made illusions: in his opinion, the Defense could be valid only with full support of aviation and navy. Indeed had not hesitated to ask your Government to press on London “*so that we put in the foreground the dilemma: either supply us with sufficient means to defend the island or revise the decision to defend Crete*” ⁽²⁴⁾. However, when he mentioned the possibility of an attack from the sky, said:

“I can't understand the nervousness; I'm not the least bit worried about the attack of airborne troops; I made my preparations and I got what it takes pretty well with my troops. The combined attack of troops landed from the sky and the sea is another thing: if it takes place before I have the guns and the necessary means of transport, the situation will be very difficult. But even in that case, provided that the Navy could help me, I am confident that everything will be alright (...)” ⁽²⁵⁾.

LA CONQUISTA DI CRETA (19-31 maggio 1941)

Schizzo n. 23



Churchill, however, feared an aggression "*above all – from the sky*" and recommended to Wavell to send to as many defenders as possible means to address the *Stukas* and intercepting transport of troops. Freyberg had divided into four groups of forces, essentially to defend airfields. In Heraklion there were the 14th British Brigade and three battalions of the Greeks; around Rethymno the 19th Australian Brigade and six battalions of the Greeks; near Suda two Australian battalions, two Greek and British unit contingents, part of the 10th Brigade in formation; in the 5th New Zealand Brigade Maleme: near Chania the 4th New Zealand Brigade in reserve. Given the shape of the island, once a interrupted the coastal road, there was no way to move from one sector to another the central reserve.

From the German side the task was entrusted to the 4th *Luftflotte* (Gen. Lohr), formed by the VIII *Fliegerkorps* (Gen. von Richtofen) and XI (Gen. Student). The first was to give the aircraft support with 280 bombers, 180 dive bombers, 180 fighter and reconnaissance 40. The second was in charge of land forces on the island: an assault Regiment (three battalions of paratroopers and gliders), the 7th Airborne Division (three parachute regiments and various support), three mountain regiments (two of the 5th Mountain Division and one of the 6th), an armored battalion and a motorcycle of the 5th armored Division, as well as a number of anti-aircraft batteries. In addition, in reserve, there was the bulk of the 6th Mountain Division. Out of a total of 22,750 men 750 were transported by gliders, 10,000 parachuted, 5,000 landed on transport aircraft, 7,000 would have arrived by sea.

Mussolini had, as you can imagine, immediately offered the cooperation of Italian forces, but Goering was opposed outright.

He accepted that some units of R. Marina to join the naval transport security. "*When went to Mussolini's refusal -recalled von Rintelen-he was really annoyed*" ⁽²⁶⁾.

The aerosbarco was planned in three points: Heraklion in the East, Rethymnon in the Middle, Maleme, Chania to the West. Achieved the first success, the action had to be powered by sea with reinforcements and troops of means by two convoys of caciques and small Greek fumes, protected from aviation and from a stash of light vessels, including two Italian torpedo boats. On the afternoon of May 19 took place the first launch of paratroopers on Heraklion and Rethymnon; the next morning, after a powerful bombing

aircraft, 7,000 men landed on the island, parachuted or gliders. However, resistance manifested itself immediately very strong everywhere with the Germans in full collection crisis and reorganization of forces, faced with major problems of survival.

In addition, there was to deal with the Mediterranean Fleet. Cunningham had sent four naval groups around the island. The strength in (Adm. H.D. Wipfel), with two battleships and four destroyers, was placed to the West of Crete to face the eventual exit of the Italian Fleet from Taranto ⁽²⁷⁾; Force B (Cap. H.A. Rowley), with two cruisers and two destroyers were deployed to the Northwest for the control of waters south of Cape Matapan; Force C (Adm. F.L.S. King), with two cruisers and four destroyers then reinforced by two anti-aircraft cruisers-patrolling the area to the East of the island; Finally, Force D (Adm. I.G. Glennie), with three cruisers and four destroyers, was to operate against actions of landing.

Force D was heavily attacked on the morning of the 21st by two successive waves of Italian aircraft, which sank the destroyer *Juno*, and, later, by a formation of *Ju 87*, which damaged the Cruiser *Ajax*. But the Adm. Glennie was able to build immediately. Back in the Aegean, just before midnight, he intercepted North of Chania a convoy of 18 ships with German troops, seared by the Italian torpedo boat *Lupo*. Despite the latter's aggressiveness, Force D did not have any difficulty in sinking ten boats. "*For two and a half hours-he wrote Churchill-British ships gave chase to prey, sinking no fewer than twelve boats and three steamers, all crowded by German troops. It was estimated that night drowned about 4,000 men*" ⁽²⁸⁾. A few hours later it was the turn of Force C to intercept a second convoy of 38 German boats, escorted by the Italian torpedo boat *Sagittano*, but losses were limited to just two boats. The *Sagittano*, counterattacked with torpedo and putting out smokescreens, managed to allow the convoy to reverse course and to evade destruction among the many surrounding islands. At dawn, however, intervened the VIII *Fliegerkorps*. Force C was for three hours continuously kept under bombardment and suffered damage to three cruisers ⁽²⁹⁾. In the afternoon it fell to Forces A and B, with disastrous results: the battleships *Warspite* and *Valiant* were damaged (the first had for seven

months of repairs), two cruisers and a destroyer sunk. Gen. von Richtofen was able to say: “we showed at last that a fleet is not able to operate within the range of *Luftwaffe*”⁽³⁰⁾.

Returning to Crete, it was pretty obvious that the speedy continuation of the attack was now relying solely to aircraft landings, which, although thwarted, continued without interruption. The conquest of Maleme (21 May) could be considered decisive.

Initially, the fight was seen with a certain optimism in London, as in Cairo, including Crete. The 20th Churchill informed the House of Commons that “most” of the invaders had been wiped out. For two days the command in Chief of the Middle East continued to speak of “mopping up” of survivors. The 23rd Churchill invited Wavell to send armored reinforcements to the island and to win the battle; the 24th Major heads of State reiterated the concept, urging the three commanders in Chief to take risks without hesitation. But the 26th Cunningham responded rather curtly that it was not feared or less losses, but to prevent their rise to be disproportionate to the benefits that will wish to achieve:

“Sure-would point out-we have sufficient experience of what will probably be our loss. In three days, two cruisers and four destroyers were sunk. A battleship was put out of action for several months, and the other two cruisers and four destroyers have reported significant damage. We cannot afford another experience like that if we want to maintain the domination of the sea in the Eastern Mediterranean (...). As I write, I learn that the *Formidable* and *Nubian* were hit by bombs and are returning to base”^{(32)*}.

The evening Freyberg was to telegraph to Wavell:

“I’m regret having to report that, in my opinion, my orders to troops here, in Suda Bay, are now coming to the extreme limit of endurance. Whatever may be the decision by commanders in Chief from a purely military point of view, our situation here is hopeless (...)”⁽³³⁾.

The defense of Crete had broken and the night on 29th began the evacuation of the British troops, ended by night on 1 June⁽³⁴⁾. Enemy losses amounted to 12,000 army and 2,000 men of the Navy. Evacuation operations were able to transfer to Egypt 14,580 men, of which 2,000 Greeks. The *Mediterranean Fleet* losses were sensitive: 3

foot note #31 does not appear in the original text

(31) A. SANTONI and F. MATTESINI, op. cited above, p. 88.

Cruisers and 6 destroyers sunk, 16 other units, including 3 battleships and the only carriers available to Cunningham, heavily damaged ⁽³⁵⁾. German losses, according to official source, data were of 1,353 dead, 1919 wounded and 2,621 missing, many of them surely died.

For the enemy to lose Crete became particularly serious tone, from a psychological point of view, because it added to the recent disasters of the expulsion from Cyrenaica and Greece. In an absolute sense meant the passage about the aero-naval base of primary importance for the control of the Central and Eastern Mediterranean. German victory in the evaluation, while celebrated for the brilliant success in the first attempted invasion operation in history, the high price paid, much higher than budgeted, ended certain to negatively. Given that the attack had been departing the surprise of finding a garrison on the island three times that estimate, the precious and limited wealth of *Luftwaffe* paratroopers proved almost more than halved. Hitler, who had reluctantly granted permission for the company, came to the conclusion that the effectiveness of the paratroopers for surprise attacks was over: "*the hour of the paratroopers is passed*" went then to often say to Student ⁽³⁶⁾.

In General, the value of Crete remained, however, limited to the installation of a part of *X Fliegerkorps*, whose influence will manifest noticeable throughout the Eastern Mediterranean basin. Engaged in preparations for the forthcoming campaign against the U.S.S.R., the OKW did not even consider the possibility of taking advantage of the success and to use the island as a springboard for new key actions aiming at the conquest of Cyprus, and the subsequent leap on the Suez Canal, as suggested by Student and insistently breezy from Roatta, or the Elimination of Malta.

But Britain's position in the theater of operations in the Middle East was complicating matters considerably. With the Baghdad Treaty of 1930, which entered into force in 1932, England had recognized the independence of Iraq after the expiry of the mandate of the Society of Nations. The young State had undertaken to assist Britain in the event of war, and to allow the passage of British troops on its territory to travel to Palestine. London maintained a small military mission and had two air bases: one at Habbaniya, 80 km west of Baghdad and one in

Shaibah, near Basra. To protect the airfields were recruited local militias.

In September 1939, the Iraqi Government had broken diplomatic relations with Germany, but did not declare war.

No step, however, had been accomplished in respect of Italy and British pressures to induce Iraq to break relations with Rome remained without result. But the domestic political situation was full of tension. The Emir Abdul Illah, Regent of the State in the name of Faisal II, was pro-English, while the Prime Minister, Rashid Ali el-Gailani, showed clear sympathy for the axis. In January 1941 the contrast between the two became so strong that Rashid Ali came to resign in order to avoid a civil war. However, on the occasion of his visit to Cairo, Eden had concluded with the Iraqi Foreign Minister, an agreement which in fact made very vague State independence. The nationalist party, then, become aware of new undertakings, carried out a coup and topple the Cabinet before they arrived to present the text of the agreement in Parliament. On 31 March the Regent left Baghdad to take refuge on a British warship. Rashid Ali, brought to power, set new conditions for the landing of troops in Basra: disembarking and transit that the previous Government had authorized for 50,000 men, was limited to no more than a battalion a time.

Wavell had enough worries on their own, therefore, since March 8, according to Gen. Auchinlek, Commander-in-Chief of India, had asked in London who, in the event of a war in Iraq scenario, operations, at least initially, is performed under the supervision of the command in Chief of India. The chiefs of staff accepted the proposal.

When there was a coup for Britain poses the question whether or not to recognize the new Government. The chiefs of staff were in favor of a drastic military action, but the three commanders in Chief in the Middle East-facing the unfavorable developments in Greece and war with the initiatives of Rommel in Cyrenaica-suggested the simple use of the units of the *Royal Air Force* in Iraq and above all a strong diplomatic action. It was not a solution that Churchill could accept. On 16 April, the British Ambassador, Cornwallis, informed Rashid Ali that England wanted to make use of agreements for the transit of troops to Palestine.

Thus, the 17th, an a part of the *King's Own Royal Regiment* was transported by air to Karachi and Shaibah, the next day landed at Basra command of 10th Indian Division (Gen. W.A.K. Fraser), the 20th Indian Brigade and divisional units. At this point, Rashid Ali requested that these troops quickly crossed the country and announced that no other British contingent would land before the departure of the units already arrived, and finally, that under no circumstances the British forces could overcome the effect of a Division. Statements that Cornwallis asked London had a pithy response: Rashid Ali had usurped power through a *coup d'état*, then had no right to expect that your request was accepted. Indeed, the 30th the 2nd Indian Brigade landed at Basra.

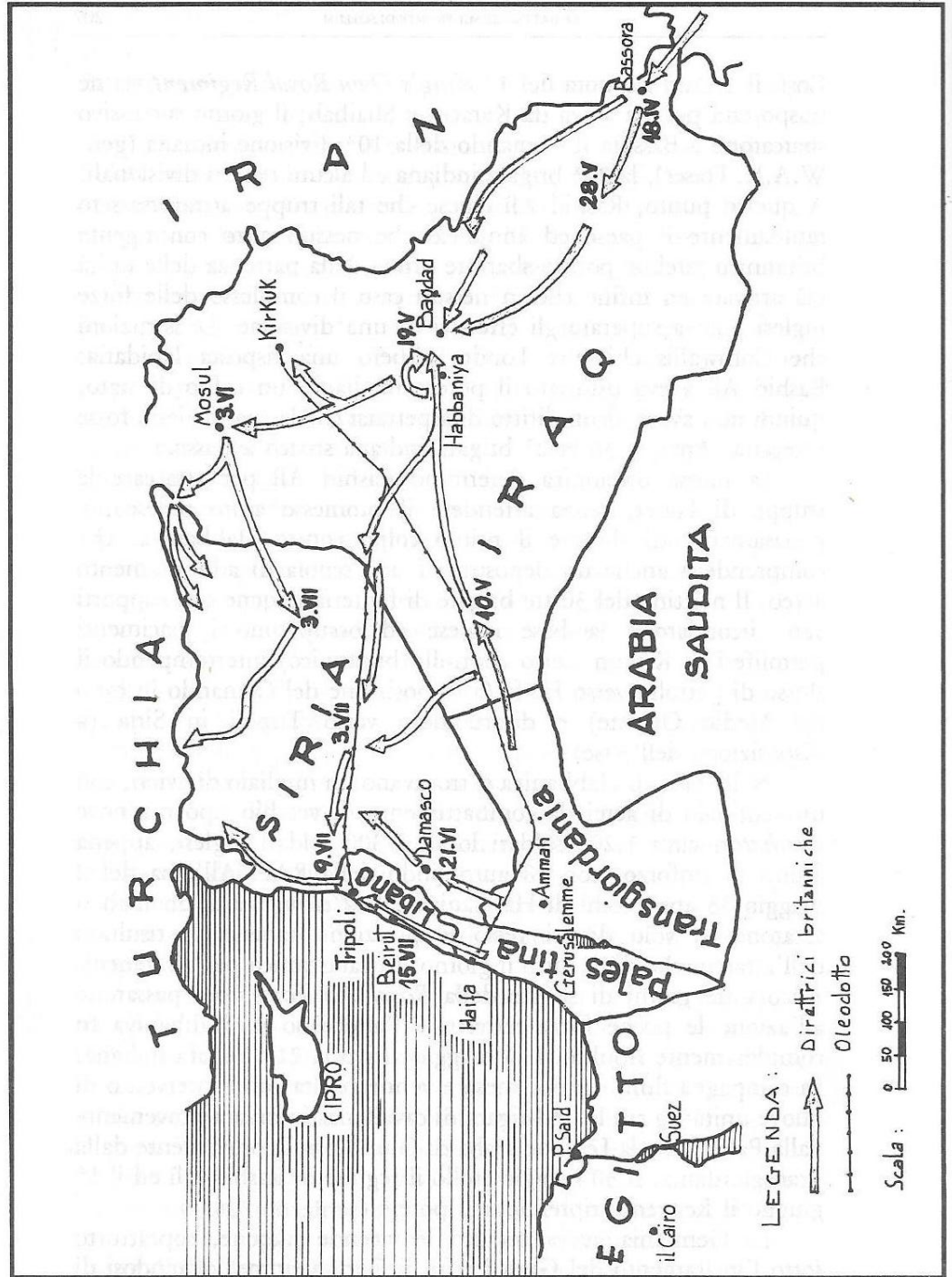
The British move caused Rashid Ali to attack Fraser's troops, without waiting for the promised German aid, namely to strike the first blow against Habbaniya, which included a deposit and an air training school. On the morning of the 30th three Iraqi infantry brigades with various media surrounded the base and occupied the oilfields of Kirkun (under British control) by disrupting the flow of oil to Haifa (available to the Command in Chief of the Middle East) and diverted them to Tripoli in Syria (the axis).

In Habbaniya base were a thousand airmen, with a hundred fighters of old type but nine *Gladiator*, about 1,200 local soldiers and 300 British soldiers, just arrived in reinforcement, with 18 RAF armored cars. At dawn on May 2, 33 aircraft of Habbaniya and 8 *Wellington* of Shaibah arose in flight headed to Iraqi positions. The result of the attack, which lasted all day, was catastrophic for the politicians. Three days of sorties of the *Royal Air Force*, then passed to the few land forces and the plateau of Habbaniya was thoroughly cleaned. The 6 May came the 21st Indian Brigade. The campaign lasted the entire month and was resolved with the intervention of new units including 4th Cavalry Brigade reinforced from Palestine and the Arab Legion of Glubb Pasha from Transjordan. The May 30 fell the regime of Rashid Ali and on June 1 the Ruler took power (sketch No. 24).

Germany had followed the Iraqi story, especially under the incitement of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, offering to supply war material, but took things slowly; Perhaps because the

LA CONQUISTA INGLESE DELL'IRAQ

Schizzo n. 24.



his attention was directed to Crete or to Russia. Anyway, the solution was to agree with the Vichy Government (unbeknownst of Italy) and use Syria as a base for aid to Iraq. On 6 May the agreement was established ⁽³⁷⁾, however only on the 23rd, after more than two weeks, Hitler sent the directive no. 30 for the Middle East:

"The Arab Liberation Movement is our natural ally against Great Britain in the Middle East. In this context should be given special importance to Iraq, strengthening in uprising also anti-British forces in the Middle East beyond the borders of Iraq, creating havoc in communications and engaging British troops and naval availability at the expense of other theaters of operation. I therefore decided to accelerate the development of operations in the Middle East, supporting the Iraq.

If the British can be completely dislodged from their positions between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, coinciding with the offensive against the Suez Canal, and how this can be achieved will be decided only after the end of Operation Barbarossa (...) ⁽³⁸⁾.

In connection with such directive, Hitler ordered the dispatch of a military mission (*Sonderstab F*), the *Luftwaffe* ⁽³⁹⁾ and the supply of weapons to Iraq for a contest, at least initially, would be "limited". The propaganda was to be based on a basic idea: that the axis victory would have freed the lands of the Middle East by the British yoke and given them the right to self-determination (except for Syria, though). All in all, the German intervention was late and when, after the adoption of Directive No. 30, asked the R. Aeronautica to send Italian aircraft, to Mosul twelve CR 42 (27 May) to the compromised situation. And, of course, closed-in favor of Great Britain-the game in Iraq, had April in Syria.

In June 1940, after the fall of France, the Syria-whose mandate was replaced in 1936 by a Treaty of friendship and Alliance, however, not ratified by the French to consider himself bound by the authority of the Vichy Government and was made practically neutral. In late August he arrived in the country the Italian Committee of control and, as a result of armistice clauses, *l'armee du Levant* was gradually demobilized and repatriated. Remained at approximately 35,000 weapons and 14,000 French natives for internal order. During the autumn and winter, while the local situation was characterized by internal unrest, due essentially to bad economic conditions, developed

in the Middle East the propaganda campaign carried out by Gen. Catroux, De Gaulle's right-hand man, in favor of Free France ⁽⁴⁰⁾, not campaign seemed to arouse much enthusiasm, because at that time many Frenchmen regarded De Gaulle as a partisan traitor, that could jeopardize the peace terms acceptable that, instead, of the Petain Government could achieve.

The presence of axis air forces in Syria would obviously represented a serious threat to Cyprus, for the Suez Canal and British bases in Egypt and for major oil refineries of the Persian Gulf. Conversely, the possession of Syria would ensure England territorial continuity between Egypt and Turkey, strengthening diplomatic position in Ankara. In the first decade of March with Gen. Weygand, delegate of the Vichy Government and Commander of the French forces in Africa, was summoned by Petain. An official statement issued shortly after he reaffirmed the decision to defend against all colonial empire, which meant especially against Great Britain, whose aspirations towards Syria was always better up there. On April 7 De Gaulle met in Cairo by Wavell to ask that all free French forces operating in Cyrenaica and Italian East Africa were concentrated in Egypt and organized into a Division, under the command of Gen. Legentilhomme, be transferred to Palestine for subsequent use in Syria, in support of local French forces, if they were found facing German penetration attempts. The idea was in keeping with the thinking of the British chiefs of staff, who in late April wrote to Wavell to keep ready to send a Brigade to Syria to support the French resistance. Wavell expressed opposite view. Replied that Gen. Dentz, the French High Commissioner, seemed anything but willing to oppose the German presence and, on the other hand, the only troops he could scrape together in Palestine amounted for an incomplete brigade. In mid-May, the free French Division with two brigades (six battalions, a battery and a company of twenty tanks) was located south of Jaffa.

Meanwhile, following a meeting of Hitler with the vice President and Foreign Minister in the Vichy Government, Darlan ⁽⁴¹⁾, France had granted the use of airports in Syria for the transit of German aircraft destined for Iraq and authorized

sending a German aviation Mission for the Organization of the airfields. In turn, the British Government ordered the bombing of Syrian bases and announced other measures: the reserve on 17 May *Royal Air Force* bombers attacked the airports of Palmyra and Rayak (Riyah) and the city of Damascus. In the late afternoon of the next day, Catroux he went from Wavell with news that the French in Syria were retreating toward Lebanon, giving the country the Germans, so it was necessary to immediately send troops to Damascus. Wavell was little in favor of such initiatives and very cautious in accepting information from the free -French on the spot, so it took time. Informed London, going on to occupy Syria would take something like a *Panzer* Division and he considered unwise to leave the few and poorly equipped Legentilhomme forces, which-in your opinion-would not only worsen the State of things.

All the dash of the crisis had significant repercussions in relations between Churchill and the chiefs of staff on one hand and Wavell on the other. Already existed by the early disapproval for the defense of Crete, so the reluctance of the Commander in Chief of the Middle East to engage in Iraq-Syria tensions increased. The directive of the Chief of staff, to improvise a contingent of troops and prepare to reach Syria personally as soon as possible, seemed to substantiate the impression that in London they take into greater account the opinion of the leaders of the Free France than Wavell. These then, on 21 May, sent a dispatch from very explicit in Sir John Dill:

“(...) You have to have confidence in my judgment about it or replace me in command. I am not prepared to endure that Catroux, de Gaulle or Spears may impose an action that risks dangerously interfere in the military situation of the Middle East” ⁽⁴²⁾.

That same evening, Churchill responded by confirming that the primary objectives were to defend Crete and fighting in Cyrenaica; ensuring that the recommended course of action was not based on any reports. by exponents of free France but gained conviction of war Cabinet; stating that all agree in recognizing the need to address a military risk of limited scope, ready, therefore, to accept even a worsening political situation where the military action had failed:

“This decision we will of course accept full responsibility and, if we find that you are not to give his time, will take the necessary steps to meet each your desire to be relieved of command”⁽⁴³⁾.

On May 21 Wavell had learned from previous information Catroux were entirely wrong and that instead, evidently following Dentz orders all-out defense sent by the Vichy Government, had placed its wards and movements of the streets alleging Damascus. “*At the same time- Wavell later -had received telegrams of Gen. De Gaulle from West Africa, asking me with imperious tone because the French forces were not yet running to Damascus*”⁽⁴⁴⁾. Even with all the concerns to Cyrenaica and no inclination for an expansion of efforts, the Commander-in-Chief of the Middle East realize the gravity that the situation could take on where the enemy had managed to put balance in Syria, so he decided to run some risk. First responded to Churchill, conciliatory in tone, have examined the issue with the other commanders in Chief and concluded that the ground forces were to propose to reject the opponent into Cyrenaica to the West as possible, to prevent it from settling in Syria and Crete and Cyprus threaten. “*We face some difficult months, but we do not lose heart*”⁽⁴⁵⁾.

Then he tried to gather some units. On May 25 reported in London that would have sent to Damascus the 7th Australian Division (minus 21st in the Brigade, engaged at Tobruk), the French Division and units of the 1st Cavalry Division from Palestine, as well as the 5th Infantry Brigade of the 4th Indian Division (just arrived from Sudan) from Transjordan.

Dentz, meanwhile, in an attempt to avoid the British occupation, had insisted the withdrawal of German forces and on 6 June the last *Luftwaffe* aircraft leaving Syria. Gen. Wilson on June 8, Commander-in-Chief of Palestine and Transjordan, began invading action. It was not a walk because French troops of Dentz resisted doggedly. In July, after almost total occupation of Syria, also due to the intervention of British forces part from Iraq, on Gen. Dentz will yield conditions and 14 July, the Free France, now politically recognized, will assume administrative control of Syria and Lebanon. Also this part is

concluded, as well, with Britain's success. "*The success of the campaign of Syria significantly improved our strategic situation in the Middle East. It barred the door to any enemy penetration attempt from the Mediterranean to the East, flew to 400 miles farther north our line of defense of the Suez Canal and freed the Turkey from any concern over its southern border*" commented Churchill ⁽⁴⁶⁾.

* * *

In Italy, on December 6, 1940, Gen. Cavallero had replaced the Mar. Badoglio as Chief of the General staff, but the difficult time crossed by Italian troops in Albania prompted Mussolini to send him to Tirana to "moral support" of Soddu and then give him the reins of the campaign while preserving also serving as Chief of the General staff. Who ruled the Supreme Command until the end of the conflict with Greece was the Gen. Guzzoni, Vice Chief of the General staff and under-Secretary for war. After the end of hostilities, while being the definition of the terms of the occupation of Greek territory and the new distribution of the Italian armed forces in Balcania, Cavallero - to whom Mussolini had aired their intention to leave it in place as Governor-General of Greece-approached the Duce expressing "*my subdued desire to resume at the end of this mission that is going to end the exercise of the Office of Chief of staff*" ⁽⁴⁷⁾. Mussolini let pass some days, then phoned securing it on returning to Rome as soon as completed ongoing agreements with the Germans. Cavallero, then, put the most important problem: reviewing the functions of the Chief of the General staff. To this end on 14 May sent to the Duce a long letter with attachment a decree:

"Duce, the experience of many years and having myself had to consider the origin the problem of Chief of the General staff, lead me to represent you as the law establishing the Office (RDL February 6, 1927, no. 68) does not respond to the needs of the more profitable operation of the same charge and is therefore necessary to update it.

So I made lawful to arrange some tweaks to existing law (and later introduced variants), based on the following criteria:

1) Make the Chief of the General Staff head toward you in the performance of its tasks, which include: preparation for war and

coordination of State, so defensive for the metropolitan territory as overseas lands (art. 2);

2) give the Chief of the General staff corresponding to that responsible authorities, placing (as you have done with your agenda June 18th 1940) the chiefs of staff of the armed forces when he directed dependency for all with regard to the exercise of his powers.

Answers this same norm criterion that the Chief of the General staff take place in general the State immediately after the Minister, and to suppress the absurd that today a Chief of force depends on the Chief of the General staff for this, but the quality is superior to that of undersecretary (art. 3);

It seemed to me) 3 requires that, in order to respond to the Duce of military preparedness of the armed forces, the Chief of the General staff can exercise supervision on this preparation, and this not only in pure Coordination Office, which would practically nothing (art. 5);

4) experience has shown us how important it is the choice of leaders. It depends for the most part the outcome of war operations. I therefore seemed essential that this choice the Chief of the General staff is not alien and that for General officers and admirals in command of large units or corresponding charges. the Chief of the General staff can act as your consultant (art. 6);

5) also seems necessary that the Chief of the General staff is vested the activities of individual staffs that converge to the Supreme Defense Committee or descend. To reach this goal would seem practical to me that, as regards these activities, the Commission's Secretary was the Chief of the General staff; without this coordination action expected would be partially frustrated (art. 8);

6) similarly, recognize requiring the Chief of the General staff is always kept informed by Undersecretary war Fabrication on all matters affecting military readiness and efficiency of the armed forces (raw materials, production, etc.);

7) the schema that I beg to submit no longer provides the nomination of the Vice Chief of the General staff, seem possible that short absences in the owner (my prolonged absence for the war in Albania cannot be considered that in exceptional cases) the General employee can cope with the current job. If a prolonged absence would repeat itself, he can provide at the moment without tying his hands with a pre-established designation (e.g.: entrust the interim of Office at the most senior of the three chiefs of staff or the one for which the designation is more appropriate in relation to the problems of the moment).

Duce, the schema that I would submit it is based exclusively on considerations of general interest such as the long experience suggested to me.

I trust that you will welcome you in its substance to put myself in a position to be able to profitably serve”⁽⁴⁸⁾.

In essence, Cavallero wanted to assume the maximum exponent of all authority over the military chiefs of staff of armed forces and stop the embarrassment caused by the undeniable autonomy by which individual chiefs of staff enjoyed the quality of Secretaries, and then employed by the head of Government. The draft of the Decree was, then, shown personally and discussed with Mussolini and the Secretaries. After some tinkering, the final decree ⁽⁴⁹⁾ sanctioned the more power required by Cavallero: the Chief of the General staff proposed to Duce, as before, the general lines of the overall war plan but, now, following approval communicated directives to the heads of staff of armed force ⁽⁵⁰⁾. However, the priorities of the Chief of the General staff of Secretaries was dropped, with the result that direct contact heads of the G.S. of the R. Marina and R. Aeronautica Secretaries with Mussolini continued (charts 1 and 2).

Immediately instead was Gen. Guzzoni, which in the eyes of Cavallero had the huge mistake of trying to oppose, in January, to enter in Albania of four divisions from Mussolini and promises to impose, in April, the defense of the sector on the line of the river Bojana-Drin. Guzzoni, invested by the explicit rebukes of Cavallero, these return to Rome (May 18), he preferred his *ipso facto* resigned from both positions, refusing, despite the Mussolini's insistence, to remain as Under-Secretary.

Cavallero moved immediately to work. The 19th he introduced to Mussolini the draft decree on the duties of Chief of the General staff, as has been said, and proposed as the new Under Secretary on Gen. Antonio Scuero, who had to proceed to a rehash of the Cabinet, so as to limit the powers of the Prosecutor to disciplinary and administrative fields, logistics and leave the General Staff of the Army full operational competence. On 23 received Gen. von Rintelen, which delivered a letter to Keitel: “ (...) *My absence to direct operations on the Albanian front-writing-not me Cavallero enabled the longing to have a meeting with you. I would willingly and gladly recommend he [take] the opportunity to submit some problems that affect our military activity. If you believe that this will happen shortly, I'd appreciate it if I do know the most suitable time*” ⁽⁵¹⁾.

It was necessary a linkup between the two Chief

military leaders was out of the question. Also because the German intentions regarding strategy were completely unknown to our Supreme Command. The studies that the staff of the army was preparing guidelines on Guzzoni, about an action great towards the Suez Canal, played very theoretical nature-if not downright unrealistic-they cannot overcome without German help, two rocks: the use of Tunisian ports and the availability of competitive armored divisions. Cavallero demanded to let Roatta know the situation with the issue of command in North Africa, on the possibility of an offensive towards Egypt and the capture of Tobruk; then wanted a joint Commission be delivered a plan of operations against the Mediterranean Fleet.

Let's follow distinctly different issues.

In North Africa, among the victims of a British air raid on Benghazi on 22. April there was Gen. Alighiero Miele, Chief of staff of the Comando Superiore. The necessity of his replacement, rather than lead to unpredictable consequences, accelerated the process of change in the organization that the subsequent circumstances would however made it inevitable.

Guzzoni proposed as successor of Miele with Gen. Gambara – that in Albania was highlighted, as much to gain, in early June, was promoted to General of the army for war merit-and was accepted. The personality of the new Chief of staff soon led to strange suggestions:

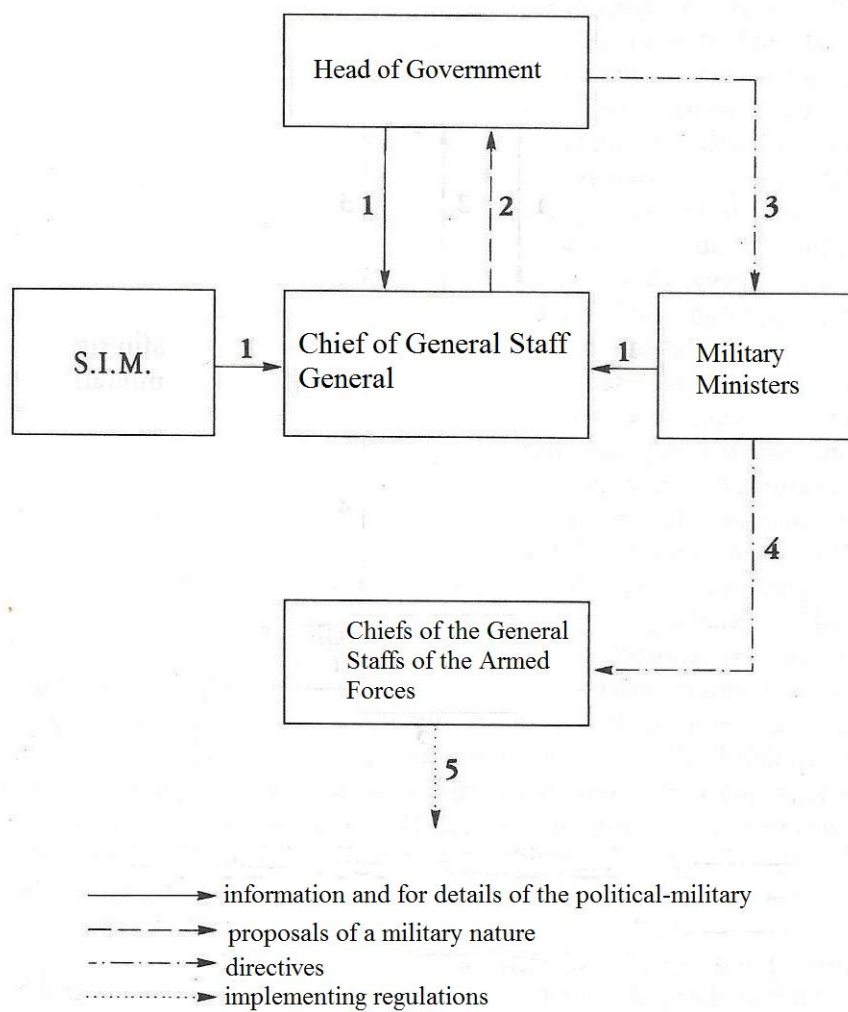
“Get Roatta-noted Cavallero-I examine with him the situation in Libya and in particular the question of command. It tends to create a nominal command but the actual command to Gambara. I believe that this method should not, even in the interest of Gambara, whose highly appreciate the ability.

Roatta speaks of De Bono, mentions to Guzzoni and then talk about S.A.R. the Prince of Piedmont; He says, however, that should the S.A.R. command only when everything was ready (...)”⁽⁵²⁾.

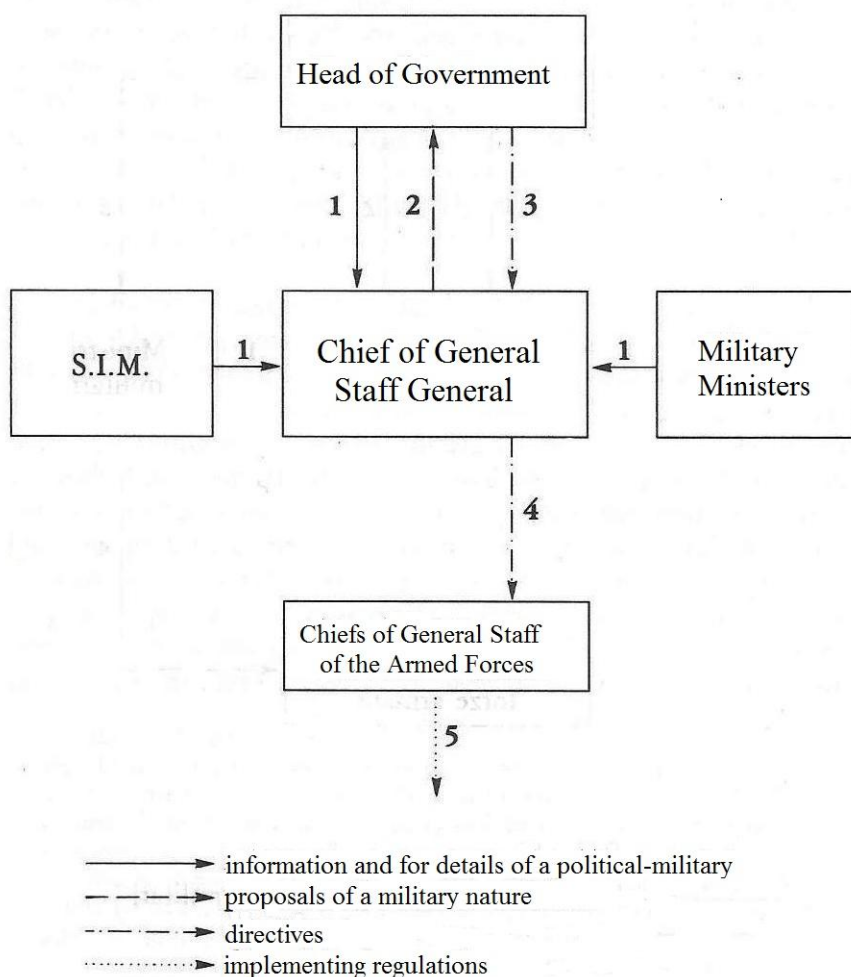
For the moment things remained as they were, but they will soon follow.

In the second half of April there was an orientation to address the Comando Supremo -but not those who have championed the issue if Guzzoni (unlikely) or Mussolini himself-the establishment of an *army of Africa* or even the *colonial army*, with decisive goals. In the East, the task

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according R.D.L. 6 February 1927. n. 69



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according R.D.L. 27 June 1941 n. 661



should result in immediate conquest of Egypt up to the Suez Canal, eventually developing the operations towards Palestine and Transjordan. Subsequent assignments included the reconquest of the Empire and doing things towards the French Equatorial Africa, till we reach the Atlantic, in Douala-Libreville (!). In the West, it was necessary to defend the Tripolitania from every threat and possibly occupy Tunisia and Algeria. To achieve these goals it believed necessary, regardless of the great German units, ten divisions to conquer Egypt and eventual push towards Palestine and Transjordan; five divisions, in addition to six or seven retrieved from the previous group, for the reconquest of the Empire and eventually move towards the French Equatorial Africa; five divisions for the defense of the Tripolitania and for doing things (in conjunction with other major units from the homeland and landed in Tunis-Bizerte), against the northern French Africa.

About the determination of the forces, was a convenient report estimated a quarter of armored units to battle against similar units, equally to motorized units for immediate cooperation with those armor and half of auto-transportable units for the exploitation of success, competition and also actions for autonomous tasks where allowed by the ground and by the situation. Therefore, a total of 20 divisions, of which 4 armored and 6 motorized, 10 auto-transportable colonial, framed in two armies and six Corps (see following page table). Of course for every major complex units were provided for adequate supports and services. A similar study, which is fitted on the decision-taken-to revise the organic divisions in Libya to adapt it to the now obvious characteristics of the desert war, required for implementing a considerable time, so that *“at present are considered more urgent the development of which is already provided for sending in N.A. and the designation of other units to be transferred”* ⁽⁵³⁾.

The Comando Supremo summoned for a more specific address, indicated broad guidelines for the preparation of the units required for the reconquest of the Empire (*army of Africa*), after reached the Delta. Given the logistical difficulties of the enterprise, it became necessary to act with the minimum of forces, seeking success through quality superiority, basing the speed and leading them essentially a road rider. So you could expect

THE PROGRAM «ARMY OF AFRICA»		
5th Army (1)	Special Corps: Auto transportable Infantry (3) XVIII Corps (3)	Armored Divisions: Ariete (1) Centaur (3) Littorio (3) Freccia (4)
6th Army (3)	Normal Corps: X Corps (1) XX Corps (1) VI Corps (3) XXII Corps (3)	motorized divisions: Trento (1) Trieste (2) Piave (2) Pasubio (3) Torino (3) Pistoia (3) Auto-trasp. colonial: Pavia (1) Brescia (1) Bologna (1) Savona (1) Puglia (3) Brands (3) Florence (3) Forlì (3) Ravenna (3) Messina (3)
(1) already in Libya (2) willing to send (3) preparing in Italy (4) to constitute <i>ex-movo</i> in Italy or for transformation of the quick Divisions.		

a mass of fifteen divisions, of which 5 to be drawn from them by those who had reached the Delta (*army of Egypt*) and 10 specially prepared in Italy with organic and suitable means in order ⁽⁵⁴⁾. The General Staff of the Army made a calculation of just vehicles and concluded that the army of Egypt was not prepared before December 1941 and the first Africa fall of 1942. In fact: the monthly production of vehicles was about 1,600 vehicles., of which 1,000 are required for ordinary supplies; 1941 production was absorbed by the army of Egypt; for the army of 16,000 vehicles needed Africa, whose 10,000 stranded by the army of Egypt and 6,000 from derive from 1942 (first ten months). Of course the great design dragged on in some studio unconvinced and ran out on June 22, when Mussolini decided to send an Army Corps in Russia.

Much more concrete was certainly the mentioned troops enhancement plan in Northern Africa equally ponderous, but whose realization was providing with the maximum effort. For 1st September Guzzoni had ordered were in Africa sixteen Allied divisions, whose twelve «mobile» and four "occupying". The big unit in place, eight were or were to be made mobile (*Ariete* Arm. Div., 5th Light Div., 15th Arm. Div., *Trento* Mot. Div., *Pavia* Inf. Div., *Brescia* Inf. Div., *Bologna* Inf. Div. and *Savona* Inf. Div.) and remained in employment (the *Sabatha* Inf. Div.). It was necessary to send from Italy four mobile divisions (one or two German and three or two Italian) and three Italian occupation. Mobile divisions would have hired the staff of "motorized Division type N.A." type; those of employment would have on their own the only vehicles for the artillery and to units.

This mass of divisions was to frame conveniently and in this regard the first proposal was to employ two armies: the 5th, in Tripolitania, and the 6th (or 10th reconstituted) in Cyrenaica. The idea for the latter the army was soon abandoned because the agreements with the OKW predicted that the Commander of the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* depended on direct from top commander, is because, by introducing the concept of an army, so to speak, from battle, "you might feel propose to appoint General Rommel Commander and you couldn't deny it, unable to contest the merits after the tests made". So Guzzoni decided — an operation in Egypt, three Army Corps, of which one German, to directly under the Comando Superiore; for the Presidium of Libya, the 5th Army Command with two Corps.

Cavallero disagreed with these conclusions. Spoke with Mussolini and on 29 May he wrote to Gariboldi which, in principle, the Duce was geared to make fully available (i.e. subtracting the commitments of Tobruk) the Terminology; to form an Italian Corps assign the task to the siege of the fort; to proceed to the establishment of an Italian motorized Corps and to form, with the latter and the *Deutsches Afrikakorps*, an army under the command of Rommel, dependent on the Comando Superiore. "*Everything should have a gradual implementation, in relation to inflows from here, that will be oriented in the sense that you already requested, with only those variants that you believed to propose*" concluded Cavallero.

The study carried out by the staff of the army on the cost and the possibility of an offensive against Egypt was very accurate and without illusions. In fact stated openly that the operation was possible only if conveniently prepared in the availability and development of on-site necessary units and logistical apparatus, "*particularly with regard to vehicles*", and that the chances of success have diminished with the passage of time since, due to the difficulty of the maritime transport between Italy and Libya, the rate of influx of reinforcements was favorable to the enemy. It appeared, moreover, can predict with accuracy when the offensive would begin, however, given that it took three months to put on organic foot site divisions (but with only 60% of vehicles) ⁽⁵⁵⁾; that the pace of new divisions transported was about thirty days for each, and to have the minimum of ten divisions (plus the *Sabratha*), including five armored) needed to reach the Delta, it was necessary to send another five to Africa ⁽⁵⁶⁾, one could say that the cycle could not begin before the end of January 1942.

About the problem of Tobruk, the project delivered by Roatta to Cavallero (7 June) was intended mainly to assess the ' *weight* ' of capture, since how much better they could be defined by the command in charge of the attack. The overall computation amounted to five divisions (two armored and three infantry), thirty artillery groups (of which half of medium caliber), four bomber groups, eight companies Sappers and four companies flamethrower. A number of very significant forces in relation to the existing ones. But there was also a

important consideration of a general nature and pertained to the need or opportunity of the operation itself. Presumably Britain would staunchly defending Tobruk for strategic and tactical reasons and for moral reasons, and then became logical to expect the strong divisions engaged therein wear and not ready their availability for the next offensive against the Delta. Taking account of both the entity then the needs both of the impossibility of transporting in Africa by September other divisions to replace those worn out, there were serious doubts about the appropriateness of capture of Tobruk, where it, after a short time, continue towards Alexandria. In other words, there was to wonder if it wasn't better to confine itself to the investment of the fort and beginning the offensive towards the East.

Gariboldi was watching the study and expressed his opinion very skeptical. "*I agree guidelines for the overall concept-noted in pencil on the study- for the rest all premature. About that time, given how much we need and the pace of arrival, we will not be ready in December, if well!*". Rommel, will instead opposite view. On 21 June, after the second battle of Sollum, support with the need for Roatta do everything possible to take the fort.

As the plan against British fleets, the guiding concept of Cavallero was to "*attract enemy forces by creating an objective that concerned it (convoys) on one side and on the other side of the Strait of Sicily and then attach them with naval action in mass*" ⁽⁵⁷⁾. Now assume possession of all Greek bases give guarantee of success. The battleships were to depart from Taranto. Approximate date: August. Riccardi and Pricolo substantial objections did not, not even about the purpose: "*to ground the English fleet before that of Germany get the intervention of the French fleet (a matter of prestige as of military power*" ⁽⁵⁸⁾ and the preliminary study was entrusted to a joint working group, which was part of Gen. Gandin, Comando Supremo. A few days later, Gandin reported that the R. Marina, taking account of the conditions under which it was and commitments for Commons convoys, could make available against the English fleet two battleships to mid June ⁽⁵⁹⁾, with three heavy cruisers, and twelve destroyers. The areas suitable to air and naval incidents were between Sicily and Sardinia and the West of Sicily. To exclude, however,

an action in the Eastern Mediterranean, due to the dominant presence of the *Mediterranean Fleet* and the low potential of Greek bases. Cavallero was not convinced and insisted not to rule out a priori the possibility of mass action against the fleet of Alexandria, who, after all, was the more nagging. The purpose of pursuing-among other things, very questionable in terms of realism-came down to a simple matter of prestige, decidedly ill-placed. The assumption, then, that a convoy lead Cunningham and Somerville to join West of Sicily was very unconvincing. Never until then the opponent had attacked Italian convoys with light or underwater vessels and aircraft. Perhaps the idea drew an argument from the British fleet from Gibraltar and Alexandria to *protect* its convoys, however, obviously the question changed appearance. However, it is commendable that first attempt to prepare naval action with a thorough coordination of efforts. Studies will continue and will lead to a Mussolini ⁽⁶⁰⁾, but in August two records of Cavallero will be widely illuminating. On 19 August he wrote: "*the Navy has been that fuel stocks are reduced to a minimum and so divided that there is everywhere a comprehensive Fleet supply*". And 21 August: "*I get Riccardi and Pricolo. My basic concept: Mediterranean make you enemy inhabitable by all means available: fighters, submarines and aircraft*" ⁽⁶¹⁾.

Last problem, summarizing our fix, was to transport overseas. The Comando Supremo did the calculations. Monthly supplies to Libya, considering also the joints in reinforcements, involved 15 ships for ordinary civil and military supplies and for the losses and the Constitution of stocks. The transport of a division called for a maximum of 30 ships. Because Tripoli was able to receive in a month for 70 merchant ships over 350,000 tons s.l., you could theoretically send a Division per month. However, this was not a sustainable pace due to the length of the path from Trapani to Tripoli; the impossibility of the R. Marina, securing stockpiles against underwater and surface attacks; the decrease of cargo vessels; route hazard, these factors led to severe transport constraints.

The German-Italian forces in Libya was estimated at 164,000 men, 8,800 Italian and 7,000 German trucks, 3,500 horses and 1,500 donkeys. In addition, for the purposes of ordinary supplies

It was necessary to take into account 20,000 Libyans and 100,000 military members and their families, all headed to military administration. For these forces, as well as for the needs of the other armed forces and the civilian population, it was necessary to send monthly 80,000 tons of materials and 60,000 of fuel, for a total of 30 travel-steamer.

Supermarina foresaw a maximum 5 monthly 6 steamers convoys each, then the 30 travel/steamer available were sufficient only for ordinary supplies. Admitting, for pure hypothesis, that the R. Marina was able to continue escorting 12 convoys per month, as done recently for the German unit, would take six months to transfer the six divisions. However, availability of Tunis, Bisena and La Goletta -whose potential was a total of 33 ships in Dock property or points-would solve the problem: maritime location halved, surmountable distance within a few hours, escort heavily reduced, fuel consumption also largely lower. In essence, there existed the possibility of carrying two divisions a month. The duration of the cycle journey on the Trapani-Tunis was calculated six to seven days (two for loading, unloading, two for one for the Naples-Trapani and one for what Trapani-Tunis).

Only 70 miles of Sea ensured the continuity of the departures of trains. Whereas, conservatively, the departure of 6 steamers every two days, you would have a rate of two divisions a month, then three months for six divisions. Starting with June, at the end of August could be in Libya six large units, in addition to the ordinary, supplies to the losses and to the Constitution of stocks. *"Only with the use of the ports of Tunisia--concluded the study of Comando Supremo -you can submit six divisions for September. Sees no other solution. "*

Adm. Riccardi confirmed fully the existing difficulties in concluding:

"In current conditions 5 convoys run monthly (each about 5-6 ships), though is expandable to 6, where circumstances so permit, represents the most compatible with the need to ensure the necessary protection for convoys, bearing in mind that the enemy's naval activities in the Strait of Sicily, still very intense over the past three months, probably will rise again as soon as the British have ceased to be strongly engaged in the Aegean.

The number of convoys is that maximum number of torpedo boats at its best, from the need to maintain a pace albeit even if reduced and especially by the need to make more absolute the essential maintenance and repair work.

These obligations that together give reason of absolute impossibility to return to the previous convoys, which had wholly exceptional character, perhaps too long, and that can no longer be taken as normal and in fact continued”⁽⁶²⁾.

In reality, however, the statistical data that supported the reminder (see next section) were significantly wrong by default ⁽⁶³⁾ and contraction that was maritime traffic was not so sensitive as predicted. In June, "for example, were transported to 125,000 tons of material, one of the highest amounts of the entire war.

Maritime transport with Libya From 10 February to May 31, 1941							
Month.	Convoys			steamers	cargo		
	Ger	Ital.	Total		men	Vehicles	Materials (tons)
February	5	8	13	49	20,366	4,374	56,547
March	10	4	14	72	22,713	5,414	60,853
April	8	5	13	62	14,576	3,287	45,726
May	2	4	6	35	8,600	1,882	51,564
total	25	21	46	218	66,255	14,984	214,690
Note: the statistical data are those reported by memorandum No. 11 presented by the Adm Riccardi dated June 1, 1941..							

All in all, the attention of Mussolini and Cavallero had carried on individual problems, none of which was solved by Italy should be either alone, to the point where they were things, but clearly was not a strategic plan aimed at solving the war in the Mediterranean using harmonic, combined and concentrated of the three armed forces of the two allies united.

At the end of May von Rintelen, who represented the German interlocutor, and that included the embarrassment in Italy (but knew nothing of Hitler's intentions), had repeated talks with Roman Summit. Cavallero recorded them. The May 26 wrote:

“18:00 Hours. I get von Rintelen and I went with him from Duce. Il Duce exposes von Rintelen the absolute need for the passage to Tunisia, in relation to this concept illustrates the situation in Cyrenaica and asks the concern regarding von [sic] Keitel. Subsequently the Duce speaks to the issue of Iraq, Rintelen and the opportunity to send aircraft, artillery and anti-tank guns (if you believe that there are chances of success). Finally the Duce please confer with von Rintelen [sic] Keitel about his warning that, after taking Candia, one should take Cyprus. With Herakleion and Cyprus in the hands of the axis would be hard pressed to the permanence of the English fleet in Alexandria. For my part I say to the Duce that SOS must be to the Führer by saying that if we do not have fuel soon, our fleet which made many valuable and appreciated services by the Germans will be reduced to floating pontoons”⁽⁶⁴⁾.

The 29 von Rintelen led Keitel's response, but not even a nod to the interview requested Cavallero a few days before:

“Hours 19:30. I went to confer with the Duce. Interview of Duce with von Rintelen. Rintelen says:

1) Granting the passage to Bisena⁽⁶⁵⁾ is German only and only for non-military supplies. For now we can't do, it should do so by force. He added that this is but a first step but said concerning the thing;

2) Counterparts, Rintelen. has mentioned all of them. A counterpart is particularly that of non-warlike transport to Rommel. Trucks can pass the Commission buys in Tunisia. The Germany can use the railway line until Gabes and also got that French steamers bring those supplies from Toulouse⁽⁶⁶⁾ to Bisena;

3) For Iraq, von [sic] Keitel means that the aid is substantial;

4) About the occupation of Cyprus, von [sic] Keitel believed that the operation is not to be considered because the distance between Cyprus and Candia does not allow sending convoys with fighter escort. Excellence Cavallero intervenes saying that this operation was not designed by us. The Leader stressed the need for us to have to Bisena and equal treatment of the Germans. In exit excellence Cavallero said to von Rintelen that the reference made by the Duce in Cyprus in the previous interview was by way of pure conversation. Rintelen referring to the matter of Bisena repeated that this is but a first step”⁽⁶⁷⁾.

At this point, Cavallero, although had not already included, had to realize that such a conduct of the war was unacceptable, however not stopped and tiredly shrugged her even with Mussolini claiming to come to a joint Conference for putting all the cards on the table and see together how to play them. The final brushstroke to this discouraging context came from Berlin. The May 31 “*Hitler did know that want to confer with the Duce as soon as tomorrow or after or Il Duce didn't like either invitation nor form (...) and set the day after tomorrow. At Brenner. There was mentioned*

the object of the visit, but the rough guess, I believe should be one of these topics: France or Russia” ⁽⁶⁸⁾.

The June 2 had, thus, the Brenner pass separate talks Mussolini-Hitler and Cavallero-Keitel. The first was broad and vague. Apparently, Hitler did not want to find out your game. Mussolini was pleased *“at first meeting, also because it has found that there has been no decrease in tone Italian-Germanic relations”* ⁽⁶⁹⁾, but a few days later, namely on June 10, the anniversary of Italy's entry into the war, blurted out: *“(…) And Personally I have Pocketful of Hitler and his way of doing. These meetings preceded by a call to Bell I don't like: the waiters are called bellboys. Then what kind of talks? I have to attend a five-hour monologue quite boring and useless, talked for hours and hours of Hess, of Bismarck, things are more or less related to the war, but without an agenda, without eviscerating a problem, without taking a decision (…)”* ⁽⁷⁰⁾.

The conversation between the two military leaders had more or less the same character, Keitel was hinted to Iraq, now collapsed, and Syria, to help; then he spoke of Cyprus, very weakly defended but attacked only by sea from Rhodes. Basically, a few sentences inconclusive on each point. The question was a little touched France longer: the Germany had obtained the 'permission' to land supplies at Bisena, avoiding the use of strong manner that would have caused the separation of the colonial empire from metropolitan France and given backbone to De Gaulle's movement, it was ultimately about *"go step by step to use grants, then we can get more than is provided for in the Armistice"*.

Cavallero tried to bring the discourse on transport through Tunisia *“under Germanic masking”* and requested that as soon as possible be established a project, initially large and later delved into *"so you can also infer a flat time for preparation and subsequent start of operations"*. The inconsistent or desired the elusiveness of Keitel: *“is absolutely right, But you can't do operating glides if you don't know the clear situation of supplies”*, Cavallero insisted on knowing whether *"transport than we need, except for men, you can implement in a reasonable time, or in a not very distant future."* But Keitel dropped the question: *“I can't respond immediately to this question, but I will*

elements of reply as soon as possible come to list in order of necessity, urgency" and expressed some obvious and generic concepts. Cavallero, then summarized their intentions about Libya: reconstituting the units in place, release the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* and the *Ariete* from the siege of Tobruk, Libya in 14,000 vehicles and two to three divisions and Tobruk were not fall soon, at least one other. Then he faced the enormous problem of raw materials. The Italy-said-at the end of June would no longer be able to navigate for lack of fuel, the Italian industries were paralyzed for lack of coal and the tire situation was dramatic.

Keitel made sure that the next trip on Gen. Favagrossa in Berlin would treat such arguments; Finally, after still rambled from Dakar (point of support for submarines) to Constanta (Romanian for oil), Thessaloniki (German logistics base), Crete (air base against the Mediterranean Fleet), arrived at Northern Africa promised: *"the German Supreme command reserves the right to make known the definitive thoughts on Cyrenaica, as soon as we have received reports that were required under the command of the German Corps in Africa and that will come through the Gen. Gariboldi"*⁽⁷¹⁾.

From the German side seem clear is the intention to remain silent until the last decisions for the Operation Barbarossa and the limited importance given Northern Africa at the moment; Moreover, just remember what Hitler in his directive no. 30 for the Middle East: whether and how you will be able to dislodge the British from the Mediterranean, *"it will be decided only after the end of Operation Barbarossa"*, enterprise was not considered to be of long duration⁽⁷²⁾.

For the Italian party is undeniable the acute sense of unease that you try running in minutes by Cavallero, in an encounter that had wanted. Certain, he had put on the table the various important topics, but they leave sheepishly considerate attitude banned, by subject, and the lack of incisiveness of questions, almost forgetting the tone, reminders of the staffs of armed force, including the voluminous studies almost all with a *can't we do*, the vital interests of Libya in the Mediterranean or Because it ignored, at least formally, the imminent opening of the theater for operation red, fully justified would be his resentment for a meeting request so urgent and so useless. Would perhaps avoid a dreaded reply decidedly

negative, or- if you smell something and something for the Eastern Europe - feared appearing undiplomatic forcing the other person to break the secret of a judgment so far-reaching. The fact is that Mussolini and Cavallero had to return to Rome very satisfied with the meeting, the ally and perhaps even to themselves.

3. Operation Battleaxe (15-17 JUNE 1941).

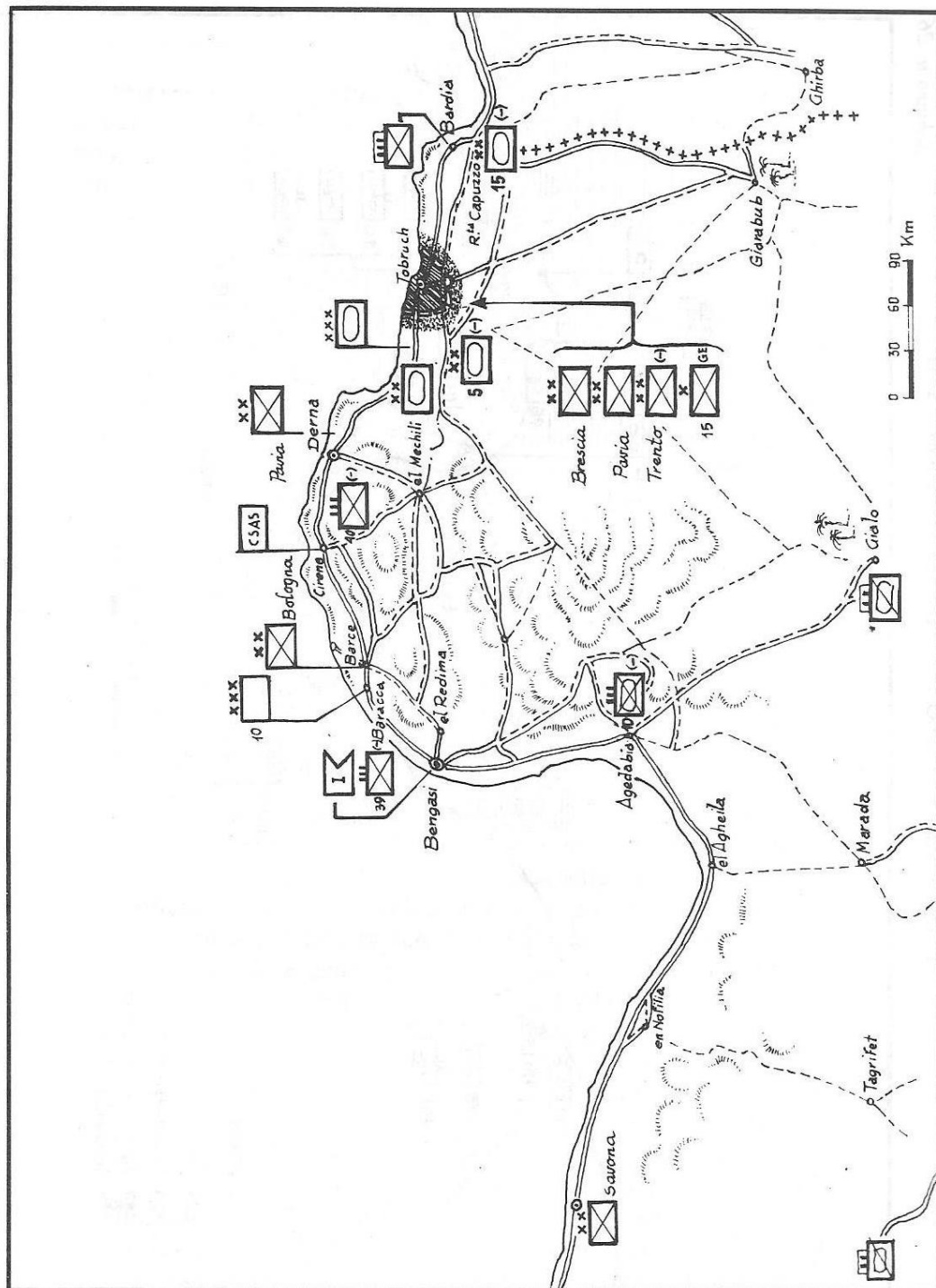
On 6 June the German-Italian forces was involved with six divisions in the advanced area, split between the siege of Tobruk and the defense of the Egyptian border, while the *Bologna* Inf. Div. was split into two parts between Benghazi and Apollonia and *Satlona* Inf. Div, even more rearward and incomplete, it was at Sirte (sketch n. 25). The 5th Air Fleet was largely stationed on the fields of Cyrenaica (sketch No. 26). At that time no one had the feeling that the new British offensive, predictable for several clues, including the suspension of licenses and permits, a more dense grouping of forces to the West of el-Barrani, the arrival of reinforcements and the radio traffic similar to that carried out in the run-up to the operation *Brevity*. Roughly speaking, you felt concerned the next effort the 7th Armored Division and two infantry brigades between Si el-Barrani and Bir Habata and three infantry divisions (including the 4th Indian) between Marsa Matruh and ed-Daba.

On 8 June there was a feeling that the enemy had completed deployment to the East of Sollum. On the 13th interceptions gave confirmation of the bulk of armored troops towards the border and examination of aerial photographs made understand that the opponent had strengthened aerial bomber units between Alexandria and Marsa Matruh. Finally, on June 14, when it was known to the British branch of each level of the conventional term *Peter*, to the peers of the name *Fritz* broadcast before it was clear the *Brevity* confidence that the beginning of the offensive for the following day.

Rommel had meanwhile proceeded to some change in commanders. Col. Olbrich was replaced in command of the 8th *Panzerregiment* by Maj. Ernst Bolbrinker; well as the Gen. Streich was torpedoed and his place taken by Gen. Johannes von Ravenstein, arrived on 31 May. Even the 15th *Panzerdivision* had changed Commander: to Gen. von Eisebeck, wounded, was

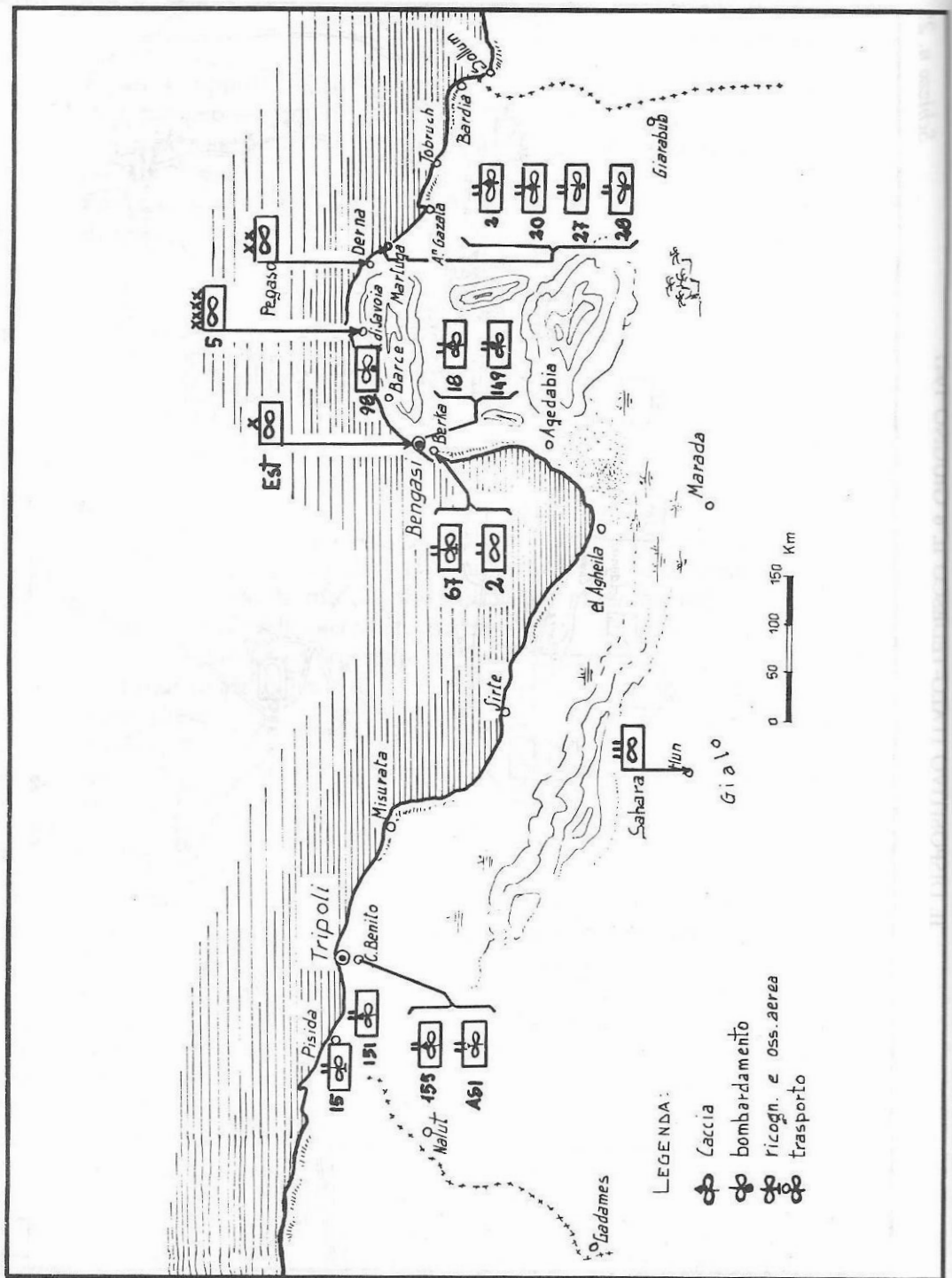
IL DISPOSITIVO ITALO-TEDESCO IL 6 GIUGNO 1941

Schizzo n. 25



IL DISPOSITIVO AEREO ITALIANO IL 15 GIUGNO 1941

Schizzo n. 26



substitute Col. Neumann-Silkow. In addition to various 'repatriations' Commander of the *Afrikakorps* had long shot among the front-line units observing, critiquing, praising. When he learned that H time approached, put the face of Sollum and ordered the 5th Light to move south from Gambut. The deployment to the border was as follows (sketch No. 27).

Halfaya stronghold: from step up to the sea. It was strengthened by field fortification works and protected by a minefield not very deep and of limited scope. Its garrison consisted of 400 Italians ⁽⁷³⁾ and 500 Germans ⁽⁷⁴⁾;

Stronghold of Sollum embraced: Sollum Alta & Sollum Bassa. Was devoid of fortification works, so the Defense had to be based on dry-stone walls and repair of bags on the ground. The garrison amounted to 200 Italians ⁽⁷⁵⁾;

Musaid stronghold: had pitched small works. Its garrison was 220 Italians ⁽⁷⁶⁾;

Stronghold of fort Capuzzo: the strengthening work covered redoubt. There were 180 Italians ⁽⁷⁷⁾ and 30 Germans ⁽⁷⁸⁾;

stronghold of hill 206: garrisoned by elements of the 5th Light;

stronghold of Bir Hafid (elevation 208): held in place by a complex mixed ⁽⁷⁹⁾, it was the southernmost fixed structure.

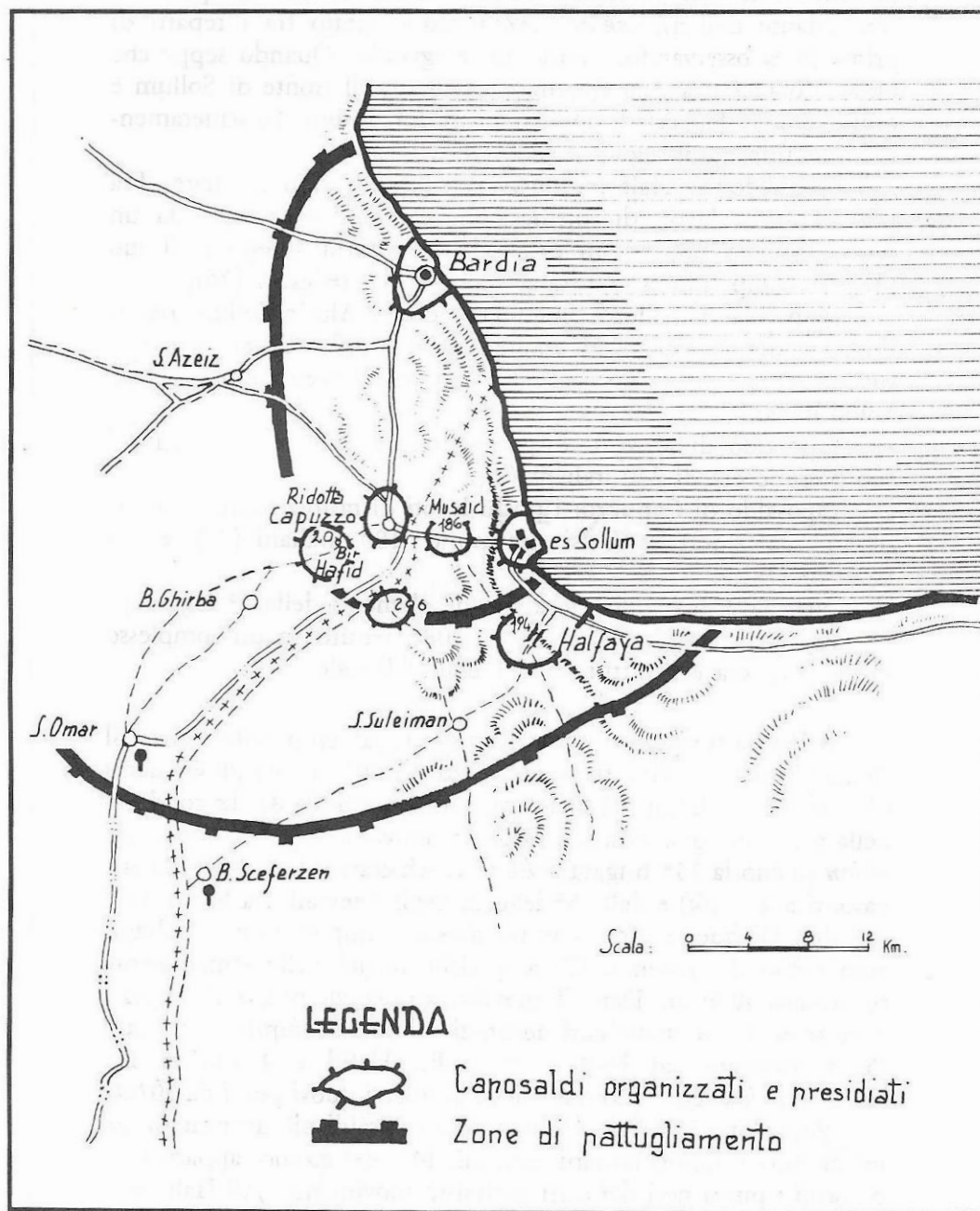
At Bardia was the rest of the grouping of *Trento*: command of the 62nd infantry, I/61st and II/62nd less items located in the strongholds, and a mortar company with 81. The conduct of the defense was based on the action of the 15th *Panzerdivzsion* maneuvered (minus the 15th *Schützen* Brigade, deployed in Ras el-Medauar, in front of Tobruk) and 5th Light in the intervals between the static structures. Of these, one was of the utmost importance: The Halfaya, the true pin of the system. There was something new in the German anti-tank position. Given the foreseen armored attack, anti-aircraft pieces from 88 had been intended for anti-tank duty immediately (there were 5 to 4 at Halfaya Bir Hafid and 4 with the 15th *Panzerdivzsion*) and had been put on line the new pieces from 50/60.

Shortly after the 04:00 of June 15 by more advanced strongholds there was a rumble of engines far later, in daylight, appeared to binoculars blackheads "British tanks moving. At Halfaya there was only one comment: "*Sie kommen! They Come!*". Operation Battleaxe was beginning.

The strongpoints of Salum on 15 June 1941

I CAPISALDI SUL FRONTE DI SOLLUM IL 15 GIUGNO 1941

Schizzo n. 27



On the evening of May 26-while it was now clear that the loss of Crete was only matter of days-the heads of the Chiefs of Staff, in London, made the situation. The occupation of Crete by German side would allow the organization of a maritime line of communication from the Hellenic West Coast to Cyrenaica. To oppose this, supplying Malta and continue to snare of convoys to Tripoli, it was necessary to have the airfields of Eastern Cyrenaica. As a result, the first objective was to attain a decisive victory in the Western desert to "*destroy the enemy army in a battle fought with all available forces*". This directive is addressed to Wavell with approval of the *Exporter*, the intervention in Syria, proposed by Wavell three days earlier. Churchill was not content of official communication and wanted to write personally to reaffirm certain concepts in their own way, but, above all, to touch a topic that was very close to my heart:

"(...) We all were very puzzled when you sent Wilson to Palestine and assigned Beresford the Western Desert. Although this is a good Division Commander is hard to believe that he can compete with Wilson in military stature, reputation and experience of a high command in the desert war. (...) I ask you to consider whether there is still time to give Wilson the command [of the Western desert]" ⁽⁸⁰⁾.

Just read the message at the start, Sir John Dill responded immediately against the *Premier*, sending him to hand a letter of strong disapproval "*to feel a duty to let you know that there is much in it [message] that I do not like*", first of all because the relevant dispatch anything added to the directives just sent by heads of staff in accordance with his orders; Secondly to have attributed to Tobruk unrealistic strategic opportunities; then for certain expressions, whose form was such that it could make equivocate on the issue of acceptance of loss,

"Finally – continued Dill-I don't like the suggestion that Wilson took over Command of the Western desert. Wavell can believe that if you do not agree and things go wrong he will be blamed. Actually, this tip can perturb Wavell in a decision, right or wrong it is, he now has taken. And Wilson has really great things to accomplish in Iraq and Syria" ⁽⁸¹⁾.

Wavell responded to Dill stating you want to commit all his armored forces in the offensive against Rommel and hoping

This proved the deciding factor. Unfortunately, the reconstitution of the 7th Armored Division was going slowly and it was not possible to think of moving before 7 June, at the very least. And he added: "*I just inform you that the scope of the achievement reached by this operation is, in my view, questionable.*" However, confided to repel Rommel West of Tobruk and reopen communications with the fort. Of course he would seize any opportunity to exploit success, but had to take into account the difficulty of mechanical nature relating to tanks just landed and the poor staff training. "*We will not accept battle-concluded-with confidence despite numerical inferiority, as we did with the Italians.*" Then sent to Beresford-Peirse commanded the operation, initially named *Bruiser*⁽⁸²⁾ and subsequently *Battleaxe*, following preliminary statements issued from May onwards.

For this offensive had been discarded two projects. The first considered an infantry attack backed by *Matilda* against the positions of Sollum -Bardia, while all *cruisers* were to focus quickly on Tobruk to break the siege. It was put aside because there were not sufficient forces in the means of transport. The second project involved, as first time indispensable, a battle begun by the 7th Armored Division West of fort Capuzzo, leaving the continuation on Tobruk for a second phase. This project was abandoned: not allowed to face the opponent with all forces reunited and was not told that lead to desired battle. The third project was approved and made into the plan. Based on it were some beliefs: it was vital that Rommel was fully beaten and driven over Tobruk; the time factor was very important in order to prevent the arrival of reinforcements and aircraft land at the opponent side. Operating design included, in summary, three steps: first, defeat of the axis troops in Bardia-Halfaya-Sidi Omar-Sidi Azeiz; Second, advanced to Tobruk-el Adem and defeat of the unit besieging the fort; the third phase, the exploitation of success on Derna and el- Mechili and, if possible, beyond. The role that the garrison of Tobruk was supposed to play in the succession of stages was left to Beresford-Peirse. "*The success of this operation is of vital importance for the defense of Egypt*", incited Wavell. As soon as the Western Desert Force was moved, much bigger, predictably, was the victory.

Wavell would also respond to Churchill and in doing so showed no trace of anger or resentment. He explained that in his choice for the command of the Western desert had had to take into account the heavy burden of his Secretary served him to Wilson, first in Greece and then to Palestine. As to Beresford-Peirse, he was a good soldier, well oriented on the specific boards, which would certainly have done well. On the other hand, to the point where they were ready in the two theatres of the desert and of Syria, was not appropriate to introduce changes.

On 30 May. Wavell reported to Dill the efficiency of «tiger cub». Of the 21 Mark VI light tanks, 8 required a complete overhaul. the 15 *cruisers* Mark IV (to 13) had the engine with high mileage; the 67 cruisers Mark VI ⁽⁸³⁾ were in good condition; of the 135 *Matilda*, the first 69 available May 28 many would needed small repair. Given the situation, the next day had to ask to be allowed to postpone *Battleaxe* to June 10 and when that date will have to move it again five days-with Churchill's irritation-sum to settle O'Moore Creagh, the Commander of the 7th Armored Division, which had asked for additional time to complete the shooting and tactical training of the crews. Meanwhile, the morning of June 8 had begun Wilson's campaign in Syria.

On the evening of the 10th, after another visit to Sidi Barrani, seat of the command of the *Western Desert Force*, Wavell transmitted to Dill definitive information about *Battleaxe*. The attack was to be launched from three columns. Coastal-one composed of an Indian Brigade, the *Central India Horse*, a campaign artillery regiment and an engineer company-was aimed at Sollum and given the competition the center-column for the Halfaya field. The Central column formed by the bulk of the 4th Division and 4th armored brigade-would act on the escarpment, from the South, to take Halfaya, Bir Wair and Musaid fort Capuzzo. The left-column consisting of the 7th Armored Division, the 4th armored brigade-would also act on the escarpment, but further South, along the Bir-Sidi Suleiman Habata-Sidi Azeiz, to give protection to exposed flank and to force battle enemy armored forces. While the first two columns had the task of dealing with the static structures of the axle and remove them, the third was the encirclement and the interruption of supplies. Wavell was a clash of

tanks East of the frontier during the attack on Halfaya pass, or the Capuzzo -Sidi Azeiz during or after the attack on the redoubt. The result of the first phase of the battle, depending on the developments of the operation. The general approach was to isolate Bardia and head to el-Adem with the 7th Armored Division, two artillery regiments, and part or all of the 22nd Guards Brigade, with a break of 24 hours where he held the wanted armored comparison. Continue on el-Adem would take a couple of days due to slow movement of *Matilda*, however the garrison of Tobruk he would not move until the 7th armored had not approached that you can combine efforts.

On the morning of the night before, 14 June Wavell sent a message of encouragement to Beresford-Peirse: "*Battleaxe is the most important operation so far undertaken in the Middle East, its success will lead to incalculable results. The first decisive land defeat of German will be an extraordinary event (...)*". On the basis of the information provided by the Intelligence Service, Wavell believed that the first phase would have enforced about 200 between *cruisers* and *Matilda* against certainly 100 *Panzer* of the Sollum front and only in the worst case even 200 *Panzer* hurried from the blockade of Tobruk. A quick victory on the first day would have, therefore, made hopeful for the next. In fact, the 15th *Panzerdivision* had only 85 efficient tanks and 5 Light 50.

The air support provided by Air Marshal Tedder, who had replaced Longmore, was the maximum available, at the cost of taking some risk in other theatres. Were collected four squadrons of *Hurricane* fighters and *Tomahawk*, two *Blenheim* bombers, one of *Maryland* and three squadrons of *Wellington* as well as two other squadrons for strategic exploration. Though four *squadrons* were just flowed from East Africa and not knowing the desert and many pilots were not tested. According to the comparison of the opposing air forces would have seen 128 English medium and heavy bombers against 79 Germans and 49 Italians, and 116 English fighters against 76 German and Italian 156. The *Royal Air Force* had to focus, in particular, the raids from 12 to 15 June on enemy columns in movement between Tobruk and the frontier. During the battle, fighter patrols were to remain in the sky of the land, while the bombers were prepared to intervene, on request.

The *Mediterranean Fleet*, for its part, had to prepare to open to traffic the port of Sollum and continue the supply of Tobruk.

ORDER OF BATTLE OF THE <i>WESTERN DESERT FORCE</i> FOR OPERATION BATTLEAXE
Commander of the <i>Western Desert Force</i> (Lt. Gen. Noel Beresford-Peirse)
7 th Armored Division (Maj. gen. Michael O'Moore Creagh) with
4 th Armored Brigade (Brig. A.H. Gatehouse):
4 th <i>Royal Tank Regiment</i> (with <i>Matilda</i>)
7 th <i>Royal Tank Regiment</i> (with <i>Matilda</i>)
7th armored brigade (Brig. H.E. Russel);
2 nd <i>Royal Tank Regiment</i> (with various <i>cruisers</i>)
6 th <i>Royal Tank Regiment</i> (with <i>Crusader</i>)
Support group (brig. J.C. Campbell);
1 st , 3 rd , 4 th and 106 th horse artillery
I bn <i>King's Royal Rifle Corps</i> .
II bn <i>Rifle Brigade</i> .
Sub-units:
11 th Hussars
4 th engineer company
13 th Field Park company
4th Indian Division (Major Gen. F. W. Messervy) with:
11 th Indian Infantry Brigade (Brig. R.A. Savory);
II bn. <i>Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders</i>
I/6 th <i>Rajputana Rifles</i>
II/5 th <i>Maharatta</i>
22nd Guards Brigade (Brig. I.D. Erskine):
I Bn. <i>Bufs</i>
II Bn, <i>Scots Guards</i>
III Bn. <i>Coldstream Guards</i>
Sub-units:
<i>Central India Horse</i>
25 th and 31 st campaign artillery
4th, 12th, 18th and 21st engineer company
11th field Park company

THE OPPOSING FORCES DURING OPERATION BATTLEAXE			
Italian-German large unit		British large units	
actually	Supposed by the enemy	actually	Supposed by the enemy
at the border		at the border	
5 th Light 15th Panzer <i>Trento</i> Mot. Div	5 th Light 15th Panzer <i>Trento</i> Reg. KG	7th Arm. Div.: 4th Arm.Bde 7th Arm. Bde support group	4th Arm. Bde 7th Arm. Bde
before Tobruk		4 th Indian Inf. Div. 11 th Ind. Bde 22 nd Gd Brigade	4 th Indian Inf. Div. 22 nd Gd Brigade Cav. Brigade (?) Mech Brigade.
<i>Ariete</i> Arm. Div. <i>Brescia</i> Inf. Div.	<i>Ariete</i> Arm.. Div. <i>Brescia</i> Inf. Div. <i>Trento</i> (-) Mot Div. <i>Pavia</i> Inf. Div.		
on gebel cyrenaic		at Marsa Matruh	
<i>Bologna</i> Inf. Div.	<i>Bologna</i> Inf. Div..	unspecified units	two divisions

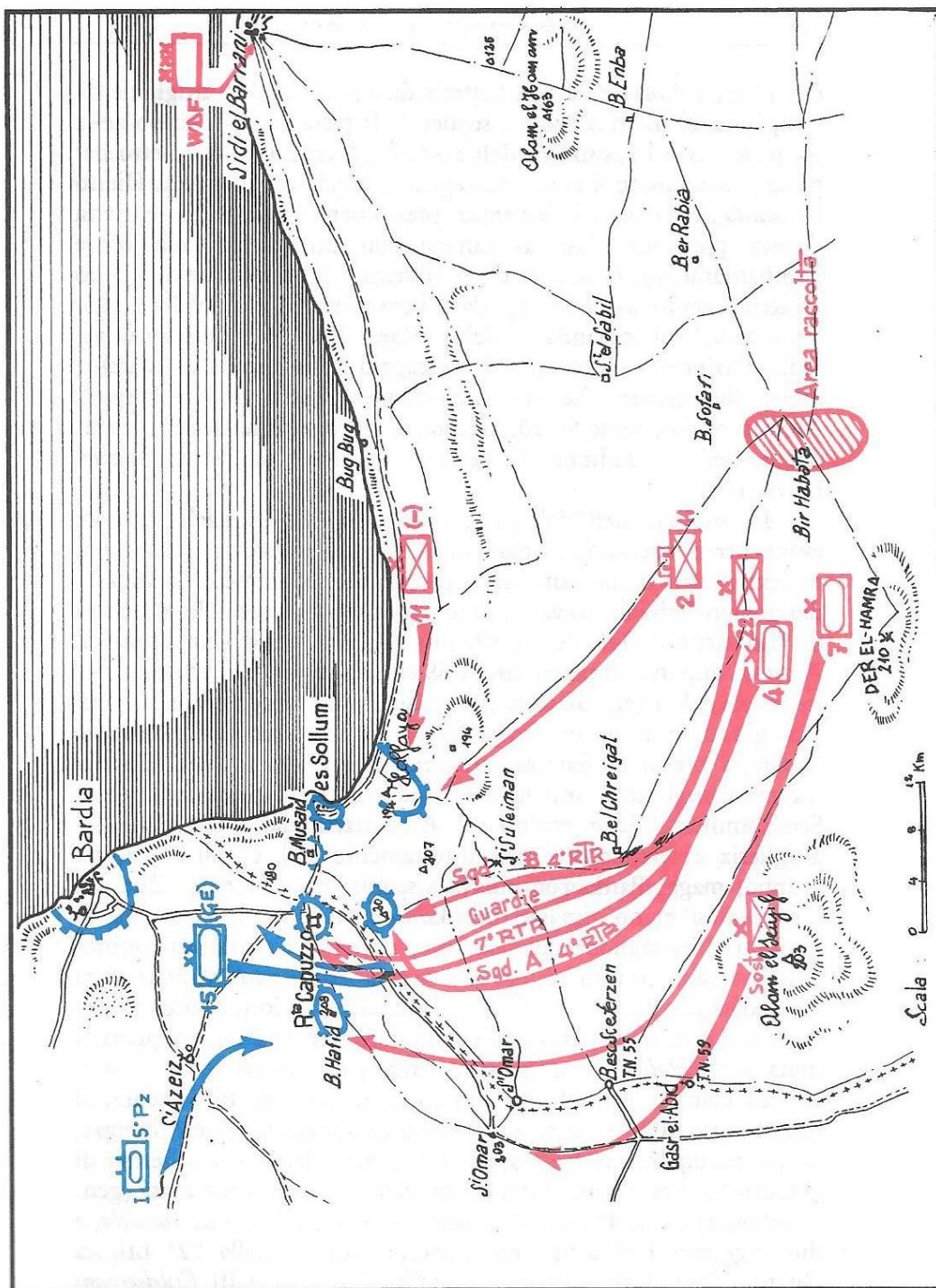
In the late afternoon of the 14th the coastal left column Bug bugs and at Sofafi. Shortly after midnight Beresford-Peirse's troops had reached the basis of departure. The design brief operating exposed previously found a complexity of running in practice (sketch No. 28). The 11th Indian Brigade (Gen. Savory), which had as its aim to contribute to Sollum and conquest of Halfaya pass, started to advance along the coastal strip with the I/6th *Rajputana Rifles*, the II/5th *Mahratta*, two platoons of the squadron of 4th *Royal Tanks* (equipped with *Matilda*) and a field battery of 88/27. At 5:45 the *Rajputana* were holding on the slopes, tanks and *Mahratta* the flat. It followed the *Central India Horse*. At first the holds of the land offered some protection, but as soon as the two battalions arrived at close range by the Italian-German positions a heavy fire action stopped them. The six *Matilda*, then entered the minefield laid out in front of the coastal barrier held by the German 1st company and there were more: four exploded on mines and two remained locked up while continuing to fire.

The remainder of 11th Indian Brigade, namely the 2nd Battalion *Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders* strengthened by C Squadron

The first day of the operation Battleaxe (June 15, 1941)

IL PRIMO GIORNO DELL'OPERAZIONE BATTLEAXE
(15 giugno 1941)

Schizzo n. 28



the 4th Royal Tanks and a battery from 88/27 of the 31st campaign artillery, had moved on the 6th following the trail along the edge of the escarpment, to Halfaya positions. Approximately one kilometer from the squadron opened out and accelerated the pace. Behind the *Matilda* advanced the *Cameron*s, soon posted. The battery was to prepare the assault tank with an intense but brief bombardment. A series of green rockets and the radio communications "Green message" reported that it would take over the step. At about 09:15 the 4th *Royal Tanks* Commander -which followed the action-radio received the conventional "Red message", meaning that everything was proceeding well. Suddenly, around 10:00, alarmed voice resounded of the commander squadron C: "they're doing my tank to pieces" ⁽⁸⁴⁾.

The Presidium of the Halfaya was ruled by Capt. Bach, evangelical pastor and splendid Commander, who, conveniently stationed all his weapons in locations ideally made by Italian engineers, had ordered to open fire only in safe shooting range. When the, "Queen of the battlefield", the *Matilda*, appeared in full view the anti-aircraft 88 came abruptly in action and the "Queen" descended from her throne. In rapid succession by a hail of armor-piercing bullets, eleven on twelve *Matilda* soon went up in flames, while the Defense raises fire on attackers regardless of British artillery. Semi-submerged from explosions, the battery from 100/17 of the 2nd rapid artillery, controlled directly by the Group's Commander, Maj. Pardi, kept firing furiously. Only two British tanks were, a *Matilda* and a light tank. Join the battalion of *Cameron*s who, driven by a mind, had taken refuge at the head of a *Wadi*, they were pinned throughout the day (and the next). So, pretty much, ended the attack on Halfaya pass, uncertain tone nicknamed then *Hellfire Pass* (pass of the fire of hell).

The center column, almost in the area of Bir Habata, headed Northwest and, more or less to the height of Bir el-Chreigat, opened on a front of about 25 miles, behind a screen of armored cars. Consisted of the bulk of the 4th armored brigade (Gen. Gatehouse) with the 4th and 7th *Royal Tanks*, all equipped with *Matilda*, and two regiments of horse artillery as well as the 22nd Guards Brigade (Gen. Erskine) with the I *Bufs*, II *Scots* and III *Coldstream Guards* and 25th and 31st campaign artillery. On the right, on

track to Sidi Suleiman, attacked the squadron B of the 4th *Royal Tanks*. More at the Center proceeded in parallel the 7th *Royal Tanks* and the Guards: they focus on their goal, fort Capuzzo, past-without-engage the position of hill 206, that information gave defense as well. Finally, on the left there was A Squadron (less the two platoons on detached with the first column) of the 4th Royal Tanks, with flanking tasks.

The 7th *Royal Tanks* crossed hill 206, reached the border wire and waited for a couple of hours the Guards, then resumed movement, crossed the border and proceeded at a speed of 15 kilometers per hour, followed at a distance by infantry on foot. The *Matilda* arrived at around noon, fort Capuzzo and broke into the stronghold, after a short struggle, expelling the defenders. In five tanks had been destroyed and some damaged. A first immediate German counterattack with *Panzerjäger* was repulsed with the loss of three other tanks, then the onset of the guards allowed the consolidation and enlargement of the struggle towards Musaid. The Italian stronghold was attacked at around 17:00, some *Matilda* accompanied by a battalion of guards, but resisted and the tanks arrested about 900 yards from the position. Then, slowly, the British penetration was limited to secure communications between the static structures still in German-Italian hand and pointed in the direction of Bardia, though without much conviction, partly because of intervention by a 88 mm gun carried on the outskirts of Bardia and two Pzkw IV, with a 75-piece, caused the loss of half a dozen or so *Matilda*. The increase dimension was the counter-attack launched at 18:30 from a battalion of the 5th *Panzerregiment* to resume fort Capuzzo. Resulted in nothing and the fort remained in possession of the British. “*This counterattack-observed Liddell Hart-it could have been far heavier if the enemy's attention was focused all day on the greater potential threat faced by the advance of the 7th Armored Division, on the left*”⁽⁸⁵⁾. However, it was not so much uncertainty on gravitation Center British effort since the absence of the 5th Light to influence the behavior of the 15th *Panzerdivision*. Inevitably this was forced to a caution, especially since the victory would have smiled to tanks that had won the big confrontation.

As the squadron of the 4th *Royal Tanks*, arrived at the turn of the wire up to hill 206, outdid him capturing two

small German posts, so it places a platoon towards the stronghold of hill 206. The three tanks were immediately put out of action and the same happened to the *Matilda* Squadron commander, as he pushed to recognize the position. In some time the German armored cars plummeted on the small units left to guard prisoners, putting out three more tanks, freeing prisoners and making as many. At this point the Commander of the 4th *Royal Tanks*, Lt. Col. O'Carroll., informed by radio, asked permission to do intervene sixteen B Squadron tanks, held in reserve. It is not clear how Gen. Messervy, who coordinated the action, had intended to delete the cornerstone of hill 206, which couldn't be left certain alive. However opposed the request, apparently fearing he would be as a result of the lack of tanks. Only after some time returned to the initial decision and authorized the use of B Squadron. Unfortunately, meanwhile, the Commander of A Squadron, which, despite being left with just four efficient tanks, do not resign himself, wanted to attempt a last effort at 16:30. It went bad and stayed with one *Matilda*. The new attack was carried out in the late afternoon from reserve Squadron, followed by an infantry company and with the support of numerous artillery. This time the stronghold of hill 206 fell.

The 7th Armored brigade (Gen. Russel) constituted the left-hand column. It was formed by the 2nd *Royal Tanks* with 38 *cruiser* of various types (two squadrons with A 9 and 10 and one with 13), from the 6th *Royal Tanks* with 50 *Crusader* and 11th Hussars. Had left first base because the journey to be performed was longer. Even more to the left, West of Sidi Omar was moving in absolute autonomy the support group (Gen. Campbell)-with the I battalion of the *King's Royal Rifle Corps*, the II Battalion of the *Rifle Brigade*, an armored car and a horse battery-charged with the defense of the rear of the attack and mass-supply columns. Objective of the 7th Arm. Brigade, Hafid Ridge was the Ridge of Bir Hafid: a small relief elongated in the direction of the parallels, with three humps. Topographic detail, together with the misleading effects of hot air of the desert, had a decisive but not harmful. At 09:50 on Gen. Creagh received communication that Hafid Ridge had been occupied. It was a mistake. B squadron of the 2nd *Royal Tanks* was, Yes, arrived on the first hump but fell under a terrible fire of anti-tank and campaign pieces, had to withdraw.

A new attempt was made at noon with A Squadron and a horse battery. Was successful, however the silhouetted of other cannon from the second hump induced again the retreat, having lost five *cruisers*.

Took a long stagnation caused by the uncertainty of the situation. In this time the aerial reconnaissance reported enemy armored formations that came from the West heading towards Sidi Azeiz. In addition, terrestrial observers indicated that the Germans were withdrawing from the Hafid Ridge. The Gen. Russel judged the opportune moment for the resumption of the attack and ordered the 6th *Royal Tanks* send two squadrons to eliminate a group of trucks identified as important. Unfortunately it was a clever trap and the debut of the *Crusader* was unfortunate: as soon as they overcame the hump, Germans guns of 88 and 50 began to shoot without fail by hitting to death eleven seriously and damaging six tanks. As if that weren't enough, a battalion of 5th *Panzerregiment*, down from Sidi Azeiz, appeared on the left. After a series of clashes, the 7th armored brigade stationed himself quickly into the wire, leaving more than half of its *cruisers*.

Throughout the first day Rommel had practically no right on the ongoing struggle at the border. Limited himself to order to col. Neumann-Silkow to “*keep up Halfaya and beat the enemy*”, waiting for reinforcements. During the morning it became apparent the design of Beresford-Peirse. At 07:30 Rommel had been warned that for some fifteen kilometers north of Sidi Ornar strong British column was advancing northward. He felt then that the enemy intended to wrap or invest the western flank by the cornerstone of Capuzzo and unleashing Tobruk, having annihilated the 15th *Panzerdivision*. Shortly after, aerial reconnaissance information gave the assurance that the enemy intended to occupy the -fort Capuzzo and Bir Hafid and, later, the radio interception allowed him to rebuild the unit codes, the names of commanders and, above all, data concerning the British artillery and tanks. Rommel, who had already put in the alarm status the 5th Light, ordered von Ravenstein orientation to intervene according to the developments of events, but in the meantime start to Sidi Azeiz a battalion of the 5th *Panzerregiment* with a part of recon. Then he asked Gambara, Chief of staff of the Comando Superiore of the tactical Command of the *Afrikakorps* for an interview on the situation.

The fall of Capuzzo and the cornerstone of hill 206 took off every

doubt about the maneuver by launch counter-offensive on the morrow: the 15th Armored would attack from the North in the direction of the fort and the 5th Light, moved with a loop around Sidi Ornar, would go on to Sidi Suleiman-Halfaya, shrouding the British forces in the Capuzzo - Sollum. Meanwhile the Comando Superiore, worried about the lingering possibility of an attempted Sortie by the garrison of Tobruk, in especially the eastern sector, more closely interested in the ongoing operation, Rommel's had provided the Montemurro grouping, formed with elements of the *Ariete* used: bersaglieri training battalion, the VIII battalion M 13, two companies of 47/32 and a group of 75/27 totaling about 2,000 men.

The grouping had to replace the 5th Light as the reserve of the *Afrikakorps*, located to the East of el-Adem, the Trigh Capuzzo.

On the evening of 15 the Panel was as follows: the cornerstones of Capuzzo and hill 206 were in British hands, all others resisted, more or less engaged. Were put out of action the 6th tanks, but could not calculate how many still could be employed by the 7th Armored Division. German Panzer losses were slight. At 23:00 Gambara signaled Gariboldi that Rommel had not yet precise news of the 5th Light, contributed by a few hours to Sidi Azeiz, however insisted to have other forces.

Gambara suggested to bring forward as soon as possible the *Savona* Inf. Div., as a precaution, but held to express a personal feeling that the situation was less worrying as it was presented. At the bottom, "*our left holds still and, given the losses suffered by the British, they cannot insist on rushing to attack this morning*"⁽⁸⁶⁾. In fact the 7th Armored Division was not on a bed of roses. Of 100 Matilda with which the 4th Armored brigade had started the offensive just 37 (20 of the 4th Royal Tanks and 17 of the 7th Royal Tanks) were still able to fight, although a slapdash night repair work allowed to be put back in action another 11. The 7th Armored brigade of 88 cruisers. The initial had descended to 37 (19 of the 2nd Royal Tanks and 18 of the 6th Royal Tanks), which were then repaired 11 tanks at night. On balance, Gen. O'Moore Creagh had lost 50 percent of their vehicles on the first day, without having even faced the bulk of the *Panzers*.

The second day of the battle began well for Beresford-

Peirse, but ended up opening the door to significant concerns. He had ordered that the 4th Indian renewed attacks to seize the Halfaya pass and take the fort Capuzzo, which now appeared rather easy, being the battalion of the *Scots Guards* managed to occupy the Musaid stronghold with night action (4.30 a.m.), and the 7th Armored Division it's takeover of Bir Hafid with the 4th Armored brigade and maneuvering with the 7th Armored brigade and support group against the enveloping movement that the Germans seemed intending to move towards Sidi Ornar (sketch No. 29).

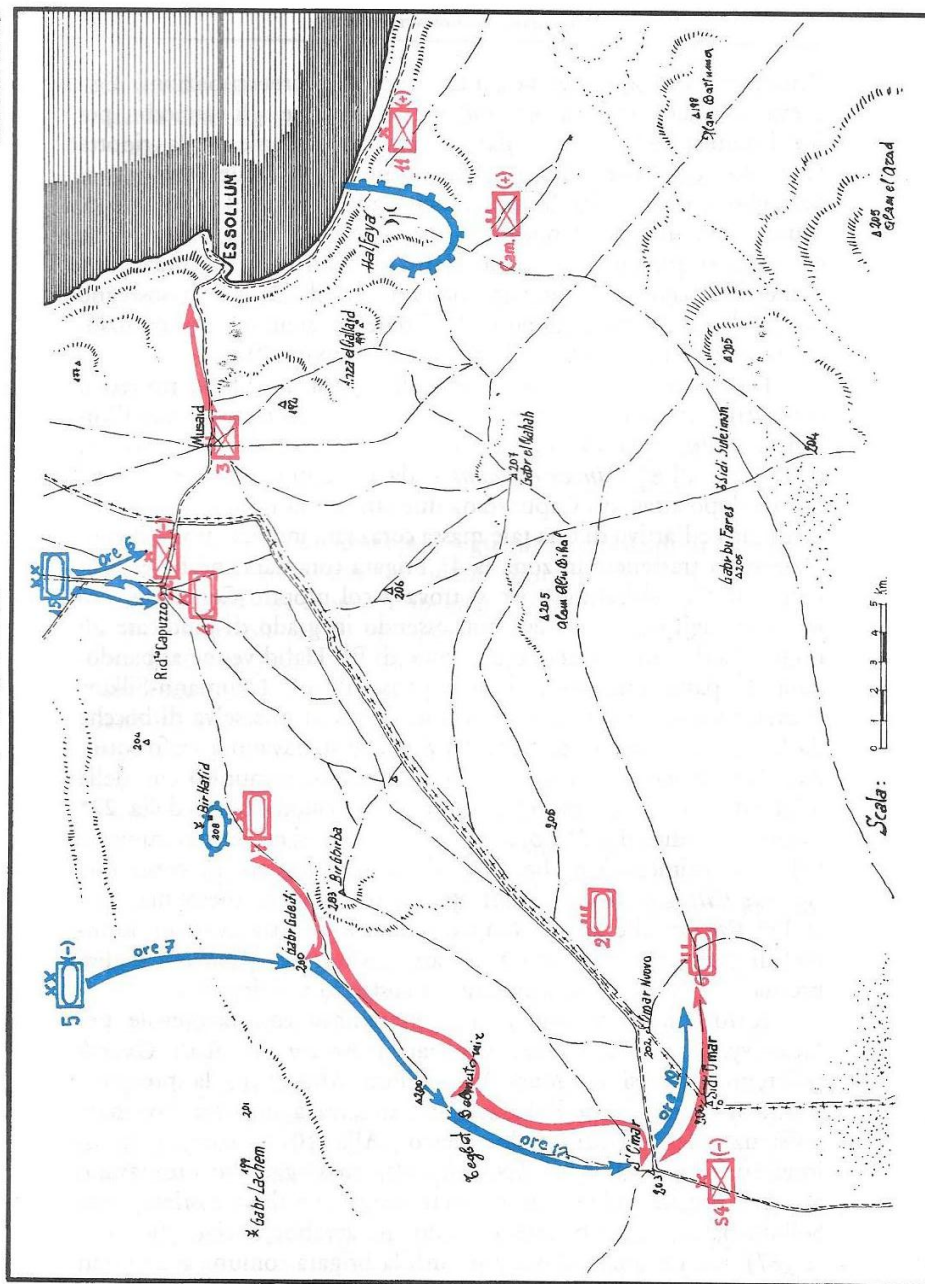
For his part, thinking – that the British would have resumed fighting at dawn, Rommel wanted to precede them and take the initiative. At 15:00 the 15th Panzer began marching in two columns, formed by the 8th *Panzerregiment* and a battalion of the 5th, and an hour later he attacked Capuzzo from either side. It was eighty tanks and the arrival of such an ironclad mass immediately induced Gen. Messervy to retain in the zone the 4th Armored brigade, neither Beresford-Peirse from Sidi Barrani, where he stood with his command, dared to insist on initial orders not being able to judge events. So the planned occupation of Bir Hafid was abandoned by the British; on the other hand Col. Neumann-Silkow received an unexpected greeting by a mass of cannons, including those of *Matilda* who shot hull down. At 07:45 the German intercept service signaled that the fight around Capuzzo were committed to good part of the 22nd Guards Brigade and the 7th *Royal Tanks* (the 4th had not yet entered combat) and that, according to the enemy, "*was a great tank battle*". Unfortunately things were made worse for the 15th Panzer: at 10:30 Neumann-Silkow was happen Rommel to be left with thirty tanks in front of the British positions almost intact. At noon was forced to fold.

Elsewhere the situation looked like this for Messervy. Admittedly, and driven the *Panzer*, the *Scots Guards* were able to go from Musaid to Sollum Alta, however the pressure against the stronghold of Halfaya couldn't overcome the stubborn resistance of German-Italian garrison. At 10:00 the intercepting company of the *Afriakorps* picked up messages that ordered the 11th Indian Brigade to advance along the coastal strip to Sollum -Bardia regardless of what it left behind ⁽⁸⁷⁾, but how much regular three minutes later the Brigade informed not being able to open up the pass.

The second day of the operation Battleaxe

IL SECONDO GIORNO DELL'OPERAZIONE «BATTLEAXE»
(16 giugno 1941)

Schizzo n. 29



In the West, the antagonists were the 5th *Leichte* and the 7th Armored brigade. The first enveloping movement begun at dawn. The second was cautious waiting, unable any longer to count on the aid of the 4th Armored brigade; However, he had to take a couple of easy success. At 09:00 its regiments invested a large motorized column escorted by a few tanks and pushing it back in disarray causing it to suffer losses towards the desert; shortly after the 6th *Royal Tanks* swooped on another troop of about 200 vehicles and it splintered. The fear of German bypass provoked a series of fights and ended up bringing in Sidi Ornar the entire Brigade. At 13:00 the 6th *Royal Tanks*, reduced to ten *Crusader* (two had been lost and are vacated to the rear for damage or mechanical breakdowns), located east of the wire waiting to refill with fuel and ammunition, and the 2nd Royal Tanks, who had fought with the support group, staying at about ten kilometers away. In front of the 7th Brigade had also shut down to refuel, the 5th Light. At 19:00, this, using his artillery fire, left pointing directly at the 6th *Royal Tanks*. The British having not waited: while not suffering damage, gradually fell back, which allowed the German Division of bend to the Northeast, to 2nd *Royal Tanks*. The shadows from the evening, interrupting the duel, were in aid of the 7th Armored brigade remained with 25 *cruisers* in all, divided into two small groups isolated, and unable to refuel during the night. The 5th *Leichte* had successful open before it the road to Sidi Suleiman.

That afternoon, Wavell, restless on the progress of the battle, had gone to Sidi Barrani. We arrived just as Beresford-Peirse was from a visit to her so satisfied for divisional the evolution of things--but the fight of the 7th Armored brigade had been indicated, somewhat simplistically, as '*a successful encounter*'⁽⁸⁸⁾-to have confirmed, for the next day, the initial directives. Wavell, right, it felt uncomfortable. Halfaya was resisting every effort of the 11th Indian Brigade; the *Royal Air Force* had suffered heavy losses and the tanks of Creagh not exceeded 40 *cruisers* and 30 *Matilda*, while likely the enemy was able to entrench the fray even more.

The same evening Messervy and Creagh took agree: the 22nd *Guards Brigade* would firmly hold the positions of Capuzzo -Musaid and the 4th Armored brigade was assembled with the 7th to

face the *Panzers* of the *Afrikakorps* ⁽⁸⁹⁾. Unfortunately, as we have seen, the 7th Armored brigade was in poor condition, so much so that at first the flares on June 17 the 2nd *Royal Tanks* retreated to the Bir Chreigat area to reorganize and the 6th came to imitate him, after a small attempt to oppose the superior enemy forces. So Russell's Brigade, about 25 miles from the border, was not certain in best conditions for work in effective cooperation with Gatehouse. It does not appear that Beresford-Peirse has taken a clear position in the face of events and agreements taken by two divisions seem a little vague and, in any event, passed during the night. The fact is that Rommel became immediately aware that the game had reached a turning point. Any eventual British pressure exerted by Capuzzo against Bardia or against Bir Hafid was brought to the bottom by the fear of a raid of enemy tanks in the rear and the danger of a cage. So he ordered the 15th Panzer disengaged most of its troops and at full speed reached the 5th leichte for sticking together along the Sidi Suleiman-Halfaya. Of course the design would have had more chance of success than before it had been put in place, avoiding, in other words, which Creagh took over the initiative. To do this, Rommel ordered that the meeting of the two divisions at Sidi Omar had took place past 4:30 a.m., now established for the start of the advance to Sidi Suleiman.

The early hours of June 17 the brigades of Creagh location was not such as to allow rapid interventions, however reported that the 15th *Panzerdivzsion* was leaving its collection area led Messervy to believe another impending attempt to retake the fort Capuzzo and, consequently, to lock in place the 4th Armored brigade. When he learns that, instead, the 15th *Panzerdivzsion* was rapidly descending towards Sidi Omar, tension in the area of Capuzzo -Musaid broke but began the concerns about the fate of the entire British Corp. The German attack was now shaping up with clear evidence. At 08:00 the 5th Light had reached Sidi Suleiman, having rejected towards Bir el-Chreigat the 7th Armored brigade. On the other hand, further north, the 4th Armored brigade had done in time to catch the 15th *Panzerdivision*, which moved on Alam Abu Dihak, managing to stop it temporarily.

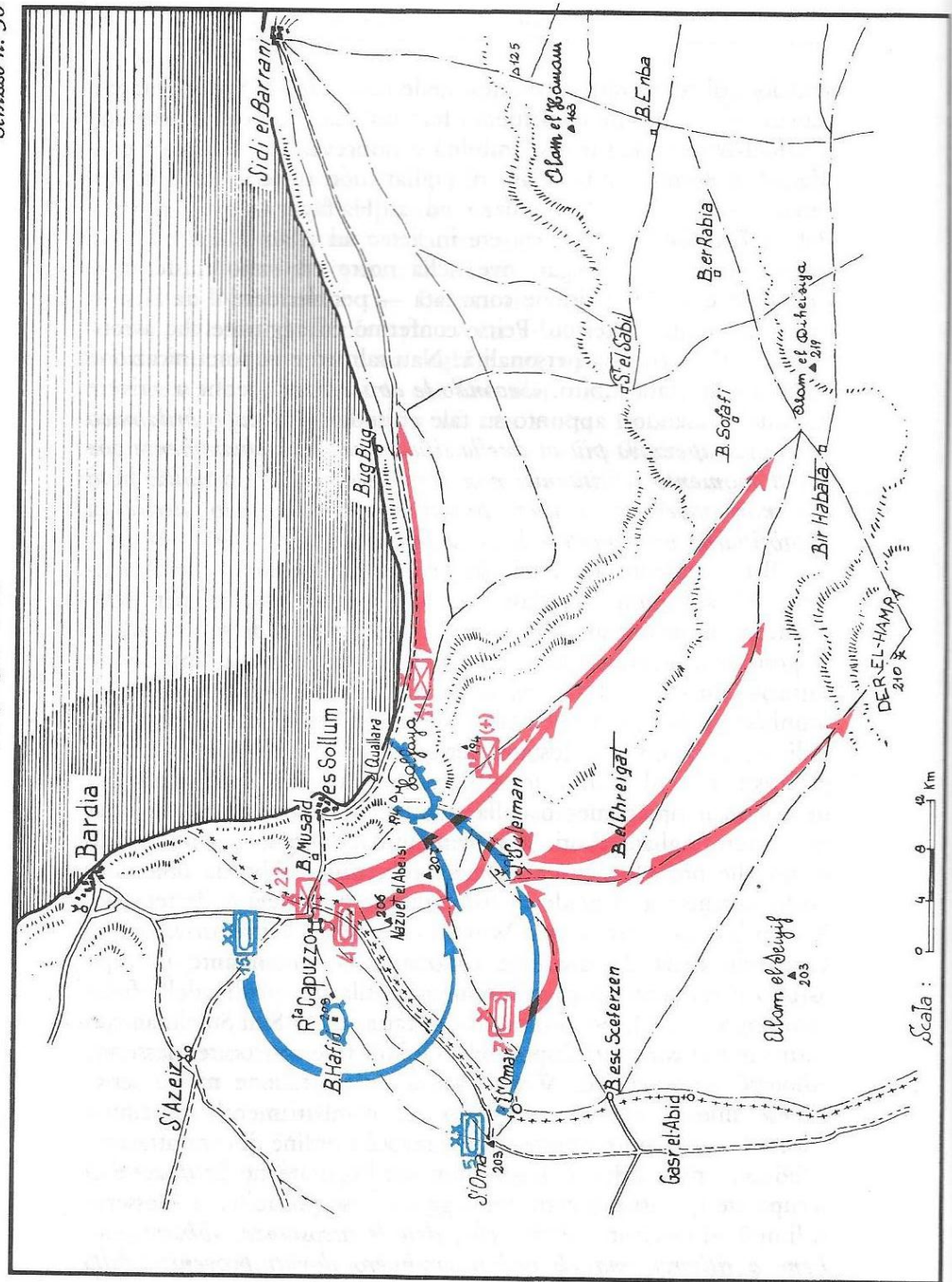
The Gen. Creagh was now facing a problem absolutely not foreseen and distressing ⁽⁹⁰⁾, aggravated by

continuity solutions occurring in broadcasting. Without hesitation and disregarding the safety measures he alarmed at Sidi Barrani: his availability is reduced to 22 *cruisers* and 19 *Matilda* and Rommel threatened to cut off all remaining British forces in the area of Capuzzo and Halfaya (sketch No. 30). Beresford-Peirse was arriving by plane at Alam el-Fakhif-Southeast of Bir el-Chreigat, where on the night had been transferred the command of the 7th Armored Division-to decide what to do in such situations? Beresford-Peirse confirmed and added that he would have led with a personality. Of course the communication was at once intercepted. *"According to appearances-had to write Rommel, based precisely on this episode-the British leader does not be more at a loss in that situation. I saw clearly that by the time the British would not have undertaken anything, since they did not know to what extent they were. I decided to take the opportunity to close the bag up to Halfaya"* ⁽⁹¹⁾.

The Commander of the *Afrikakorps* gave the order to von Ravenstein and to Neumann-Silkow and around 09:00, stating that it was necessary to prevent British tanks to escape. Now he was willing to accept a tank battle: he had learned the difficulties in which struggled the 7th Armored Division in terms of ammunition and fuel. To Messervy called Creagh 10.45 on the radio and, speaking Hindustani for forestalling interceptions, told him to the point where they were reaching at the things judged require withdrawal from fort Capuzzo and Musaid in order not to be cut off. The retrograde movement would have begun at 11:00. Creagh, of course, took no objection, because he was able to see the precariousness of the backline. Shortly before noon Wavell and Beresford-Peirse arrived in command of 7th Armored Division. The Commander listened to the account of events, took a picture of the opposing forces ⁽⁹²⁾, then ordered a counter-attack to Sidi Suleiman by all armored means available. Then did summon Messervy. When they arrived, Wavell had a very serious expression. Asked for a report on fighting again, opposing forces again revised, then rescinded the order to counter-attack at Sidi Suleiman and decided to stop the operation *Battleaxe* and retrieve as many damaged tanks was possible. To Messervy he limited himself to observe: *"I think, given the circumstances, you have done well to retreat; but the orders would come from the Western Desert Force"* ⁽⁹³⁾.

IL TERZO GIORNO DELL'OPERAZIONE «BATTLEAXE»
(17 giugno 1941)

Schizzo n. 30



Towards 13:00 lost positions in the first two days began to be recovered. At 17:00 reached Sidi Azeiz also Montemurro, is to pour in from Rommel, who hastened to preside over the fort Capuzzo, Musaid and Sollum Alta. The *Panzer* of the 5th Light, meanwhile, exceeded Sidi Suleiman, had continued to Halfaya, while his infantry engaged the support group between Gasr el-Abd and Bir Sceferzen. But the German effort found a last unexpected obstacle: the bitter opposition of the 4th Armored brigade to advance of the 15th *Panzer*. How could use just Gatehouse 14 tanks of the 7th *Royal Tanks* and 15 of the 4th, for nearly six hours, he beat vigorously to keep open an escape route to other British units. This time, absent 88 pieces, the *Matilda* were good opponents and, although eventually reduced to one third, managed to avert disaster. The two German divisions reached the Halfaya pass after 16:00 and turned North, but in the large space between Sidi Omar and Halfaya the enemy had already escaped and the night he ordered a retreat on the Sidi el Barrani-at Sofafi (sketch No. 31),.

Rommel was not satisfied with the conclusion: *"I was exceedingly irritated-for the loss of an opportunity so propitious. Just would have been facing the enemy immediately after reaching the Halfaya position, forcing him to fight and prevent him from escaping. In this way we could eliminate a large part of his offensive forces"* ⁽⁹⁴⁾. However, for objectivity, it must be recognized that the British units were already out of the bag.

The Italian-German aviation had actively participated in battle with bombing missions and machine gun attack and with the active reconnaissance of the *Western Desert Force* movements, but also the *Royal Air Force* had spent very much. His reconnaissance operated practically without interruption behind our troops from dawn to dusk and Creagh was his timely report of the rapid advance of German divisions on the left of the 7th Armored Division if he could evade a total surprise. Is it true that according to Churchill British air superiority was completely wasted, even to *"provide small troops protection umbrellas"* ⁽⁹⁵⁾. He returned to Cairo in the afternoon, Wavell set at a painful passage: inform Dill of defeat. The dispatch began with these words: *"I'm aching to communicate the failure of Battleaxe (...)"* ⁽⁹⁶⁾.

Losses were calculated in various ways. Those personnel, according to data provided by the Comando Superiore, resulted in a total of 1,277 Italians and Germans against little more than 1,000 British ⁽⁹⁷⁾:

Loses	Killed		Wounded		Missing		Total
	officers	troop	officers	troop	officers	troop	
Italians	2	86	14	322	6	162	592
Germans	2	93	15	340	6	229	685
total	4	179	29	662	12	391	1,277

In terms of tanks, the figures are very inconsistent. The *Deutsches Afrikakorps*, in a communication of 22 June, claimed 249 British tanks (237 out of use and 12 efficient) against only 12 *Panzer* destroyed ⁽⁹⁸⁾. Wavell reported to have lost 95 tanks: 25 *cruisers* and 70 *Matilda*, against 40-50 *Panzer*. Churchill recorded even different data: “were lost 29 *cruisers* and 58 tanks of the type I (...). He argued that the best part of 200 enemy tanks was then put out of action” ⁽⁹⁹⁾. Of course, the big difference is due to the fact that the *Afrikakorps* was master of the battlefield, so he merely consider lost only really destroyed tanks, all the others having been recovered and sent to the repair. For the enemy tanks were lost even that was forced to abandon, for the impossibility of recovery, but the inefficiency was due to purely mechanical causes. Of course the winner took advantage of the thing and provided for appropriate British media susceptible to rehabilitation ⁽¹⁰⁰⁾.

If the reputation of Rommel climbed to the stars, Wavell went down very low. Churchill was furious. The defeat seemed unacceptable:

"While this may seem small compared to the size of all the various campaigns in the Mediterranean, its failure was a major blow for me. The success in the desert would mean the destruction of Rommel's bold Army; Tobruk was liberated and the retreat of the enemy could easily to withdraw the enemy beyond Benghazi with the same rapidity with which was advanced (...)" ⁽¹⁰¹⁾.

On 17 June, anxious about the ongoing battle and awaiting news, he went into retreat, desiring only to remain.

When he learned of the result "*for a few hours I wandered wistfully for the Valley*". Then he unleashed "Already in April, after the sudden and meteoric Rommel's offensive, had made many reservations about the Commander in Chief of the Middle East-indeed, it was not the only-and, later, was decidedly unhappy than accomplished for the defense of Crete, and then there was the Iraq campaign, set by Chief of staff against, the opinion of Wavell: "(...) *the episode was unable to leave a deep impression in his [of Wavell] as our spirit. In time, with the quickness and speed of the measures undertaken by Auchinleck gave us the impression of having to deal with a fresh intelligence and a personal energy not yet worn out*" ⁽¹⁰²⁾. Even the provisions issued by the rapid use of tanks sent by Tiger convoy does not seem proportionate to the risks accepted and courses across the Mediterranean. Finally, *Battleaxe*. On June 21 Churchill received a letter by Wavell:

"I am very sorry for the failure of Battleaxe and the loss of so many Tiger cubs; especially because I realized, from the figures shown me by the liaison officer, than at home we supply with. I fear that this failure should increase your concerns. I was more than optimistic and I should tell you that the 7th Armored Division needed much training before going into battle. I think I should also postpone Exporter ⁽¹⁰³⁾ as long as we don't we could use more forces, but in both cases I was forced by the apparent necessity of immediate action" ⁽¹⁰⁴⁾.

That same day, Churchill sent two telegrams. The first was addressed to the Commander in Chief of the Middle East:

"1. Be concluded that the appointment of General Auchinleck to your successor as Commander of the armies in the Middle East is required by reasons of general interest. I have greatly admired the way in which you have commanded and directed these armies both in success and adversity; the victories that are tied to your name will remain famous in the history of the British army and represent an important contribution to our ultimate success in this war effort. I believe, however, that, as a result of long efforts made by you, whether you need a new look and a new hand in this area which is the most seriously threatened. I am sure that you are possibility of confrontations, the man and the officer from the brighter service to replace the Commander in Chief in India. I consulted about the Viceroy and he assures me that your appointment to this high command will be greeted with joy in India (...).

2. General Auchinleck is commanded to go immediately to Cairo, where you will be acquainted with the whole situation and establish with him the future actions that you and him decide by mutual agreement to counter the German advance eastwards which is now imminent (...)" ⁽¹⁰⁵⁾.

The second telegram was addressed to the Viceroy of India:

“Please send the following message to General Auchinleck. I have already telegraphed General Wavell.

After very careful consideration of all the circumstances I decided to submit your name to the King for his appointment as Commander of his Majesty's armies in the Middle East. You should go immediately to Cairo to replace General Wavell. General Wavell will succeed you as Commander-in-Chief in India. You should discuss the whole situation with him and discuss together the measures that you take by common consent to stop the advance of German troops towards East which appears clearly close (...)”.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾

The dispatch to Cairo came at dawn on the 22nd. Received by Gen. Dorman-Smith, the Chief of staff, who took it personally to the House of the Commander in Chief. Wavell was doing his beard. Hearing the telegram read, without expressing emotion and commented: “*the Prime Minister is absolutely right. This job needs a new look and a new hand*”⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ and resumed soaping up his face. Of course he was not the only one to pay. With him “go off” Beresford-Peirse and O'Moore Creagh. Longmore was dismissed at the end of May.⁽¹⁰⁸⁾

The second battle of Sollum deserves some consideration. In a letter to Dill on June 19, namely in the aftermath of the failure, Wavell as main cause of defeat training technical-tactical unlimited of the 7th Armored Division and wanted to point out that “*the enemy was waiting for us with a carefully crafted and counterattack was too strong*”⁽¹⁰⁹⁾. In the report that he sent to the Ministry of war in July 1946 repeats the reasons cited and added “*the fact, paralyzed the maneuver had only two regiments for each armored brigade*”⁽¹¹⁰⁾. Let us examine, then, the maneuver, the preparation, the conduct of the battle, the action of the command. Then we will go to the comments of a technical nature.

Wavell formulated criticisms on not even *a posteriori* Rommel substantially approved it: “*The British offensive was designed (...) excellently from a strategic perspective and, while stating that "the enemy's plan was simple, but simple plans are often more dangerous than complicated plans*). (indeed dubious assertion), in fact appeared convinced that the defeat was due to an unfortunate run for the inadequacy

the instrument and for the courageous and skillful strength of the garrison of Halfaya pass. Conversely Liddell Hart did not hesitate to express a negative opinion openly: "it was a plan that already contained in the items intended to cause the failure. Assigning half of his armored forces available to give man strong infantry in the first phase, it halved, to say the least, an opportunity to annihilate the German armored Regiment stationed in the advanced area before arriving to reinforce the other armored regiment from Tobruk and then reduced to a minimum the possibility of realizing the second and the third phase of the plan (...). The possibility that the British had to catch them by surprise [defenders of Halfaya] was annulled by decision, taken in the drafting of the plan, which the tanks do not operate their attack until there was enough light to allow the artillery to open fire. This decision was in fact much more serious consequences because the only battery assigned to strike Halfaya pass is continued in the sand" ⁽¹¹¹⁾.

Rommel was limited to judging the concept in its broad outlines, the conception which more or less repeated the battle of Sidi Barrani and which will become almost inevitable on the coastal belt of North Africa. Liddell Hart went deeper, watching carefully the maneuver, and you can recognize that a different the gravitation of the armored forces could result in a different pattern of fighting. Don't forget that Wavell and Beresford-Peirse knew very well to use initially for a sensitive numerical superior (actually more than anyone had imagined) and therefore the first day, and maybe just the first half-day of battle would have a decisive weight.

We also need to say that-given the shortage of vehicles-Wavell had affected the consistency of the concrete possibility of feeding of the effort. The consequences were of two types. First of all the foot infantry unit could be used simply for short-range actions. Secondly, to reduce the logistical difficulties you made need the coast road and land supplies at Sollum as soon as possible. Then the town of Sollum and Halfaya, once conquered, were not to be overcome, in order to ensure better security of supply channel again. The motorized infantry, however, was able to follow the enveloping movement of tanks, but limited to the 22nd Guards Brigade and to the Group of

support. The first was a drawn out against static structures, the second was confined to the extreme left protection exposed flank and rear. The *cruisers* remained practically alone, or at least too little sustained by support and anti-tank fire, in front of those who wished to deal with *Panzer*, according to British theories of the time, tank against tank.

The whole preparation of *Battleaxe* was dominated by the policy of achieving surprise. Given that this was achievable only in part, we cannot say that the goal has been reached; On 14 June Rommel had no doubts about the beginning of the operation for the next day. The first clue was offered by the intensified enemy air navigation. Since the beginning of June the daily charts of British reconnaissance, obtained on the basis of intercepted Marconi Gram, had highlighted how the industry between Tobruk and the border was under control with an average of two daily surveys and with four missions tips. Typical was the fact that the results are not related to the areas west of Tobruk, which made him believe that the release of the fort was the purpose of likely offensive. Even terrestrial reconnaissance had been active, but, hampered by German armored cars that had kept the media away similar opponents, had to confine itself to pointing out the apparent boundary of Italian-German positions without being able to provide the detailed information in the past-especially before the battle of Sidi Barrani-had enabled the enemy to confront the defense with excellent knowledge of the device.

Another clue was the increase of wireless telegraph activity in the sense of creating a new sweater, which in parallel with the establishment of tactical complexes, even before the move of advanced troops; very frequent change of names, indexes and frequencies ⁽¹¹²⁾; increase in communications figure, repeated references to distributing new ciphers and conventional words appear as clear indication of movement or arrival in a particular deployment area ⁽¹¹³⁾. But the measures for the protection of military secrets involving a set of secret documents from branch, often down to the minor units; documents that, at first, fell, allowing German on second day, to reconstruct the complete picture of the opposing forces engaged in *Battleaxe*, to see that the enemy had thrown all the fight and accept that the remaining reserves at hand.

The preparation of the offensive had, of course, mainly the logistics field and had been treated with extreme meticulousness, but the *Western Desert Force* did not have more of that abundance of vehicles representing the primary factor of maneuver capacity in the desert. But States were prepared motorized the services bodies and equipment on wheels to follow immediately the progress of the advanced units. In the area of Sidi Barrani, to the North, had been set up a logistics centre; in the Rabia-Bir Mella, In the South pitched the 29th deposit with three days of supplies, while the field 30th deposit was ready to cross during the maneuver. For the axis supplies and vacate, the choice had fallen on the Bir Kenayis-Bir Mella-Bir Habata, preferred, at least initially, to the coastal road, more exposed to the observation and aerial attack.

The command action of the three Generals-Beresford-Peirse, Messervy and Creagh-doesn't seem, indeed, to have the glow of vivid light. The Commander of the *Western Desert Force* was almost always at Sidi Barrani, for reasons of connection. Undoubtedly the system adopted in the Organization of broadcasts and one for the aero-cooperation revealed inadequacies: “(...) *Since you link two tasks [aerial and terrestrial] happened only in the backline, in Sidi Barrani, and not at the front, the RAF had finished with you undergo an unnecessary strain performing missions based on the principle of 'case-by-case' basis, without ever having to assign specific objectives*”⁽¹¹⁴⁾. He missed a vigorous pulse that have handled with -decision “hatchet“. Planned and wanted a battle of tanks and in that case it became necessary the participation of the *Matilda* to fight alongside the *cruisers*. On the other hand, data-precedents and having never seen the work of the German 88 guns-appeared equally granted to throw the weight of the invulnerable *Matilda* against hastily prepared strong-points in the desert. In other words, the *Matilda* had to play two roles and Beresford had left his common decide divisional arrangement, when the 4th armored brigade to pass from one to the other. Already the compromise seems questionable in itself, however the fact that Beresford-Peirse-who knew well the importance of the issue-has been brought to the battlefield to take direct control of the maneuver, resolving in any other way the problem of connections with the *Royal Air Force*, weighed heavily on the outcome. Of course on

agreements between prevailed, for divisional obvious pressure of circumstances, the safety of the infantry: Messervy not returned the 4th armored brigade to Creagh and these came to employ the 7th Armored Division not only devoid of third Brigade laid down in organic, but even from the second existing Brigade. When he returned to his orders Gatehouse, talk of Division and Brigade was euphemism: it was to use the remains. In essence, who took much of the decision-making power in the field was Messervy, who wasn't able to "lift their heads that were faced with problems-Halfaya, German counterattacks, fear of encirclement-to watch on the wider landscape and solve the problem no. 1: the armor that Rommel had managed to achieve and to bring on an opponent's weakest point.

According to Rommel, the primary tactical factor that helped the fight was represented by the fierce defense of Halfaya pass, which shone the qualities of Commander of the I/104th Schützen, Capt. Bach, and the Commander of the I/2nd rapid artillery, Maj. Pardi ⁽¹¹⁵⁾. The fall of the stronghold, would have allowed Beresford-Peirse to "*move back and forth along the coast*" and to use better the 7th Armored Division. Certain is that eliminating every pin for the *Panzer* I would have diminished the danger and, on the other hand, the use of Halfaya- Sollum as its point of support, would not only facilitate the power of battle (while taking into account that the axis supplies and debris could not be changed in a day or two), but allowed the tanks to operate «at home». Instead, according to Liddell Hart, the Halfaya field not only tactical element was decisive. There was another: Hafid Ridge, which is the stronghold of Bir Hafid. At least as far as the armored, has drawn this actually turned out to even more onerous. The position of Bir Hafid, with his strange, irregular and unexpected morphology, presented himself as a real tank trap. And it was a first and a second time in a few hours, the 7th armored brigade, lost, more than a third of its *cruisers*.

At this point he considers convenient-also because the topic has been the subject of attention from scholars and critics-a technical comparison of the tanks. Since 28 May Wavell had expressed his concerns on Battleaxe to Dill, justify with technical reasons:

“(…) The recent transactions have revealed some disturbing aspects ⁽¹¹⁶⁾. Our armored cars have armor too light to resist the fire of enemy fighter aircraft; also, not having artillery pieces, are powerless against the German armored cars with eight wheels, armed with cannons and faster. This fact makes it difficult to navigate. Since our infantry tanks, they are actually too slow for a battle in the desert and are suffering significant losses at the hands of the powerful enemy's anti-tank pieces ⁽¹¹⁷⁾. Our *cruiser* tanks have very few advantages in terms of power or speed on the German medium tanks. The mechanical failures are still too frequently (...). ⁽¹¹⁸⁾”

We consider first the defect of the slow movement of *Matilda*, not so much in absolute terms and in relation to fix alleged by Wavell to combine the action of *cruisers* with the infantry tanks, fix that, together with the lack of crew training, was held at the base of the failure ⁽¹¹⁹⁾. Also in this connection the opinion of Rommel went over to that of Commander-in-Chief of the Middle East:

“(…) But its big drawback was the lack of mobility of heavy tanks of his infantry, which allowed him to react effectively to the attacks of our types of fast tanks. The lowest speed of the bulk of his armored units was, therefore, the point that we could leverage tactically.

(…) Wavell, due to lower speed of his infantry tanks, had not been able, at the time of the German attack from the area north of Sidi Omar, shifting his center of gravity by Campbell to the area of axis troops. It remained nothing more than withdraw quickly, and this he did with minimal losses for British forces operating.” ⁽¹²⁰⁾

And once again Liddell Hart did not accept the explanation of Wavell: “In fact such coordination was not even attempted, nor was it concerned with examining the potential. The two regiments of *Matilda* had been seconded from the Armored Division and placed at the disposal of the Commander of Infantry Division from the outset, and these had then kept his orders for the duration of the battle, rather than let them go after the first stage, as was the plan. With an intelligent coordination of the "I" could play a very important role in the battle between armored vehicles, operating as robust offensive pivot of maneuver for medium tanks. There was only negligible difference in speed between *Matilda* and medium A 10 tanks, which had cooperated successfully with the fastest average in the first Libyan campaign and *Battleaxe* in the same operation. In this as in later times the Germans proved capable

to work with different types of tanks with differences in speed of no less than that which existed between the fastest English medium tanks and *Matilda*. However, the unverified assumptions that were too difficult coordination led to a complete separation between tank brigades and «I» armored brigades in the subsequent campaign, which became, as regards the English, a battle fought in two separate compartments.⁽¹²¹⁾

As for armament, the Germans had two types of medium tanks: the Pzkw (Panzerkampfwagen) III, that from 1940 to 1942 formed the backbone of the *Panzerwaffe*, and Pzkw IV, who since 1942 became the bulk tank. The first, if it was Type E equipped with a 37/45-piece (vel. init. 745 m/s), in the course of being replaced, Type F a 50/42 piece (vel. init. 685 m/s). The Pzkw IV was also exists in two versions: type D was equipped with 75/24 piece (vel. init. 385 m/s), but with a project HE kg. 6,750, able to break through armor of *cruisers* to few hundred meters; the type F was armed with a 75-piece/43 (vel. init. 740 m/s) with armor-piercing ammunition and high explosive. The useful range for the grenades HE was, to the Pzkw IV, more than 3,000 meters.

The German tanks were opposed by the pieces from 40/25 (2 lbs.), that arming the *cruisers* and *Matilda*, and cannons by campaign from 88/27 (25 lbs.). Some were equipped with armor-piercing ammunition only, others only of HE grenades⁽¹²²⁾. This meant that when *Panzer* formation appeared at four kilometers away the pieces from 25 pounds to immediately prepare for the March to avoid being overwhelmed by the enemy⁽¹²³⁾, while the tanks with their cannon from 2 pounds were forced to wait for the *Panzer* arrived at 500 meters to consider them a useful shot⁽¹²⁴⁾. It stemmed the tide of British tank to open fire at a distance of 1,000-1,500 meters with negative results and wasted shots. Among other things, additional plates applied to amour of the Pzkw III allowed a total 62 mm thickness, against which 2 lbs cannons could do nothing. If not extremely close distance.

Conversely, the British tanks were opposed by 50/42 pieces (Pzkw III) and 75/43 (Pzkw IV), anti-tank cannons from 37/45 and 50/60 and 88 mm anti-aircraft gun from. Apart from the 37-piece obvious of relative effectiveness, the short 50, on the tanks, was more or less equivalent in performance to 2 lbs. English⁽¹²⁵⁾, but the

50/60 gun was much as useful power output. The 88 is, superfluous commentary; Suffice it to say that to 2,000 meters could start firing on the *tanks*. On the use of German anti-tank vehicles, looks interesting return an order mentioned from the diary of the 15th *Panzerdivision*.. *"In order to achieve surprise, all weapons will not fire anti-tank until Is very likely to hit the target. Although the Flak 88 gun opened fire successfully, the Pak [Panzerabwehrkanone] pieces from 37 and 50 mm will not shoot to escape the attention of British tanks up to a few hundred meters, before opening fire with armor-piercing grenade (...)".*

Finally, probably a comment on Gen. Creagh took over the most important experience of second battle of Sollum *"The tactic of the Rommel was to draw our tanks on its anti-tank pieces, and then counterattack with his tanks."* Notwithstanding the evident superiority of the commanders and of the German armored divisions, although lacking in experience of the desert, in terms of tactical groups, cooperation among the various weapons, spirit of initiative at all levels, of combativeness; giving due recognition to the coldness with which Rommel was able to determine the placing of its forces in the fight, we must highlight the different conception of armored fighting. As rightly observed Liddell Hart, until that time the successes from a deep and rapid penetration occur from tank units had convinced that, in similar cases, the defense was destined to succumb because weak inherently. First *Brevity*, but especially *Battleaxe*, demonstrated that even in the desert, where irrelevant were the tactical grips, the Defense maneuvered had ample chances of success. In search of tank battle from the English, Rommel opposed the counterattack. Of course, for the action needed to stop something which serve as anti-tank barrier, and that «something» existed: the anti-aircraft piece from 88. It was enough to think about it, remembering the experience in France. And 88 also had psychological consequences. Imagining not using, nor the crews of *tanks* being able to know whether they had been hit by a bullet fired by an anti-tank gun or a tank, was born the mistaken belief among the British, their armament was lower than German. He derived a sort of distrust of British armored vehicles that last long. But all this was still just in front of the logical development of Rommel's tactical thinking: first organized use of anti-tank pieces

to break the tanker attack; then the anti-tank Cannon cooperation-tank in defense; then the same offensive key cooperation. It was a conceptual breakthrough.

The two failed attempts to unlock Tobruk from German-Italian, the two failed offensives on the Sollum by the British had determined a kind of 'stalemate' situation. He rides for both opponents, the urgent need for an adequate period of rest dedicated to strengthening operational forces, with the aim of achieving a real preponderance in a timely manner on the enemy, to the extent necessary to return possession of the initiative of operation. He was, in other words, to open a tight race against the clock to try to prevent the opponent on the goal of secure material prevalence of forces. It was to be expected following a period in which, alongside efforts to collect and transport personnel and means on the North African theatre of operations, it would have exacerbated the fight for safety or, respectively, the interdiction of maritime communications.

4. THE MISSION OF THE CHIEF OF THE ARMY N.A IN LIBYA.

Eight days after the, Brenner meeting with Gen. von Rintelen had submitted to the Comando Supremo a note stating the thought of Hitler-where Keitel had reported the interview with Cavallero-on two aspects of operations in Cyrenaica: Tobruk and the supply flow.

The first was stated as "*the most urgent task, for the continuation of the war in North Africa*" ⁽¹²⁶⁾ and entailed the expansion of fighters, anti-aircraft defense and coastal defense. Where the protection of ports of arrival-beyond that of convoys had not been secured properly, there was to think about the transfer of new forces without sensitive leaks. The Organization of supplies had to be based on two modes: quick transport to periodic character for ammunition, fuel, spare parts and supplies required by the Advanced troops on the most direct route, with a stopover, i.e., in Benghazi and Derna; transport caused by landing at Bisena and Tripoli for troops, artillery, vehicles. As the siege of Tobruk, needed heavy German artillery and probably other modern materials: for example, long-range flamethrower tanks

and more effective aerial bombs. It was, however, no doubt that the fall of the fort was the precondition for the continuation of the offensive against Alexandria.

Faced with similar “thoughts and proposals on the conduct of war in Northern Africa”, as practically was the note delivered by von Rintelen ⁽¹²⁷⁾, it is once again stumped on the exchange of views between the two allies. Cavallero played the document as a request for information on the measures taken or being adopted by the Italian side, above all to ensure the safety of mariners, and transport responded accordingly. But he concluded:

“(…) as is pointed out by the Fuehrer, the most urgent problem to be solved for good conduct of the war in Northern Africa is to quickly bring the reinforcements needed. As with the ports of Libya, even when they are implemented all the measures mentioned above, it is not possible to transport all required in a timely manner, it is necessary to initiate urgently the maximum possible utilization of the port of Bisena.

As already seen with Marshal Keitel, il Duce remains waiting to know the plan of Germanic through this transport route and when and how you can incorporate Italian transports. ⁽¹²⁸⁾.

Waiting for the German plan for Bisena, Cavallero concentrated all its attention on the cyrenaic theater. Gariboldi had sent the request report on the situation at Tobruk. After the failed attempt to seize the momentum and the next attack in force had succeeded only nicking the advanced Western positions, because of the robust structure of the defensive walls, the difficulty to locate exactly the elements and enemy artillery superiority. Hence the decision to limit the action to a vigilant investment, intended to oppose any sorties with a minimum of losses and to wear down the enemy. Meanwhile proceeded to extend the work of strengthening, the reorganization of the device, resetting the Sub-unit and sizing the hardships of most departments tested with an appropriate deployment in depth.

At the moment, therefore, the resistance from Tobruk, heavily fueled by sea, and the least offensive capabilities of axis troops measures were a new showdown. Not only that, but until the enemy had not received significant increases "*the situation can be viewed with equanimity*", vice versa if the garrison had been much strengthened and with aggressive pattern makes the situation could "*turn, becoming dangerous for us until*

to force us to remove the investment to Tobruk “. and retreat at Gazala, under organization. At a glance-he needed immediate Gariboldi-enter the motherland than already agreed and, in addition, at least one *Panzerdivision*, using any means of transport. The availability of vehicles was insufficient, since the simple, excluding normal wear *ie* combat causes losses, and were not offset by revenue from repairs. Little was then to consider aviation, in relation to multiple needs: its development was indispensable for achieving and overcoming the enemy, particularly in relation to the protection of our convoys and contrast to supplies to Tobruk.

Gariboldi acknowledged that directives of May 29 were correspondents. its orientation and assured him that in this sense were in progress or adequate measures project. Though not considered appropriate to decouple from the siege of Tobruk Rommel before he replaced German elements engaged with Italian forces there enough. You also avoid the risk that, at the first opportunity, Rommel “*emancipated from the foot ball*”, to branch out beyond the limits of the desirable.

Gariboldi also proposed to make available to Rommel the divisions instead of an Army Corps, as on other occasions, the Commander of the *Afrikakorps* had already said to dislike the interposition of intermediate Commands. In the confirm requests previously submitted, returned to clarify that these relate exclusively to the safety of the theater: for any transactions taken, namely to Alexandria, reserved the right to submit the demand at the end of the studies in progress.

Strengthening the forces in Northern Africa, who’s previously discussed, contemplated the transfer overseas of 100,000 men, 14,000 vehicles and armored vehicles, 4,000 motorbikes and 850 artillery pieces. This complex of personnel and means would enable the gradual application of the plan. At the end of May had already started the reorganization, in view of the new organic, of large units present in Libya. For Armored Division had been studying a sort order is a much more powerful:

- One unit of reconnaissance;

- Two brigades, each on an average, a tank Regiment, bersaglieri Regiment and an anti-tank and anti-aircraft battalion;

- Two artillery regiments: one with two groups of 75/18

self-propelled and two from 105/28; the other two mixed groups from 90/53 and 20 mm;

- a mixed battalion of engineers;
- services.

The arrangement meant the availability of several armored vehicles and, consequently, the transformation of the three divisions would have taken place gradually. Meanwhile, they hired a temporary order: a medium tank Regiment (Italian or French), a light tanks regiment, a bersaglieri Regiment, an artillery regiment (with two groups of 75/27, one from 100/17 and one from 47/32), a mixed anti-aircraft group, a mixed engineer battalion and services.

- Motorized type Division A. S.* had to be ordered with: a motorcycle company;

- Two motorized infantry regiments, each with two rifle battalions and a battalion anti-tank weapons and accompanying;

- an artillery regiment, with a group 100/17 howitzers (or 75/27 guns), two groups 75/27 guns, a battery of 47/32;

- a mixed anti-aircraft group;
- a mixed battalion of engineers;
- services.

The planned motorization of infantry divisions encountered, however, great difficulty for the strong vehicle deficiency, which had arrived in Africa at a critical point really, because three months all the transports were used exclusively for the influx of German units. Had been so willing to send an exclusive heavy motor grouping of the Intendenza, a Army corps motor group and a thousand vehicles for the *Pavia* and *Brescia* divisions, and also two car parks for repairs in lieu of about 2,000 inefficient vehicles existing in Libya.

The *Division of occupation* was to be composed of two infantry regiments each with three battalions;

- a machine-gun battalion;
- a anti-tank battalion;

- an artillery regiment, with two groups of 100/17, two from 75/27 and one anti-aircraft;

- a engineering battalion;
- services

They were soon issuing directives for the reordering of artillery and anti-aircraft Corps.

In Italy was the preparation of units and means for *completion* (i.e. put on organic foot) of suppose Army Corps and services for Cyrenaica, the Intendenza of X Corps, the Arm. Div. *Ariete* and Mot. Div. *Trento*, *Pavia* and *Bologna*, as well as 14 batteries of 75 and of 20 anti-aircraft defense and territorial group from 152/37 for coastal defense. Also was preparing to transfer the entire *Trieste* Mot. Div. Altogether, there were about 50,000 men starting foot, 5000 vehicles, 1,500 motorcycles and 125 pieces. Remained to provide, in the second priority, the completion of the XX Corps of Mot. Div. *Brescia* and *Savona* and occupation Division *Sabratha* (in Libya) to 5,000 men, 2,000 vehicles and 500 motorcycles. Finally it was necessary to prepare two Corps Commands of occupation with its suppose and services; the Arm. Div. *Littono* and *Centauro* (which, among other things, had yet to return to Italy from Albania, where it was), Mot. Div. *Piave*, occupying Division *Pistoia* and the other two, perhaps to establish from scratch with elements of the border guard, as well as 52 batteries of 75 and of 20 for anti-aircraft defense territorial. The preparation of these large units were not given urgent character, both for the time that it would be passed before sending them overseas, and, mainly, for the time necessary to achieve the availability of vehicles and the necessary armament and to achieve the necessary degree of training.

Cavallero decided to send to Libya Gen. Roatta and a memorandum established the points to consider, in the light of studies compiled by the staff of the army:

“1st-renewal of the Comando Superiore A.S.I. and possibly other commands in A.S.I..
Concept: particularly in the command Above must be the best of our staff.

2nd to be well aware of how does the binomial Gariboldi-Gambara, considered both in itself and in relation to General Rommel.

3rd consider the inclusion of the Staff of General Gause, and, as much as possible, orient this enlistment for the purpose that it work in the most profitable, but not hindrances, the work of the Higher Command.

4th to Examine whether it is possible, and at what time, forecasting a Rommel's army.

- 5th to Study on the spot, in competition with Supercomando A.S.I., the three themes:
- a) capture of Tobruk;
 - b) possibility of British landings in Tripolitania and our provisions;
 - c) operations to Egypt.
- 6th Ascertain what they are doing and can do further to accelerate the unloading from the port of Benghazi” ⁽¹²⁹⁾.

The first argument concerned the organization of command and here we take a step back. On 24 May the OKW had asked to enter into the Comando Superiore its own «link» chiefs of in place of the senior officer of G. S. which until then had been linking functions ⁽¹³⁰⁾. The precise reason for the request is not clear: probably wanted to mark the German presence in Northern Africa high-level, definitely responded to the desire to exert greater and more direct influence within the Comando Superiore, perhaps also had the purpose of better harnessing Rommel. However, Mussolini joined immediately, without asking many questions. So on 1 June Cavallero sent a communication to Gariboldi so laconic since unexpected:

“I Inform you that il Duce, in order to facilitate connection and collaboration between the Italian and German armed forces, welcomed the proposal of the OKW to establish a second Chief of staff of the German Africa Corps by seconding at this Supercomando.

In particular, the Mission of the new German Chief of staff, is to present and German Corp requests to this Supercomando and inform the master of the Germanic Corp on the overall situation” ⁽¹³¹⁾,

Gariboldi was taken completely aback. He understood that it was what decided, nevertheless wished to express his dissent by informing, *"for that account that you'll want to keep "*, the function to be attributed to the new Chief of G.S. was German and was completed *"with full satisfaction from Lt. Col. Heinz Heggenreiner, which I think would be appropriate to maintain "* ⁽¹³²⁾. A few days later, the arrival in Libya (9 June) of the officer in question - Gen. Alfred Gause pushed him to a second reading, far more vexed:

“I believe my duty to report that in fast can have considerable importance. He presented the German General Gause responsible to establish a Greater link between me and the German Africa Corps Command. It is 42 officers and 120 troops

The amount is significant. Neither he nor Gen. Rommel, asked a similar organ, and also the German command currently remained at least

amazed. To me it seems you want to *prepare an overlay to the Italian Comando Superiore*.

This impression is corroborated by the demeanor that generally hold the Germans toward the Arabs. Try that is to ingratiate yourself, almost to bring out their best and be preferable to the Italians. Are shades, but if you take into account that in the great war the Germans were already here (and the Arabs if they remember fondly) the assumption is strengthened.

The General also sent as head of the German Office doesn't know a word of Italian.

The above statement by expressing the opinion that this liaison Staff is not necessary and rather dangerous; but in any case should be reduced in number to two officers and they know the Italian; especially since, in spite of every good intention, to the Office of the Comando Superiore wouldn't have the ability to host material unless the General Head of mission and one or two people from his entourage maximally" ⁽¹³³⁾.

Rommel was also unpleasantly struck, apparently perceiving in new Corp control instrument of the OKW, and that could jeopardize the position of almost independence which had secured quickly. He faces, then, just to clarify expressly that the command of the German troops in Africa had been awarded only to him. It must be said that Gause- which came on the eve of the operation *Battleaxe* and had therefore to see Rommel in battle-put at his disposal. With regard to the Italian authorities, "*after some conversations (...) had the impression»-according to Rommel-they hardly would have approved the sending of some German units in North Africa; because they feared to be overruled*" ⁽¹³⁴⁾. The thesis seems rather risky: it was clear to everyone by now, the crucial assumption in the desert by armored divisions and, since nothing Italy had was similar to the *Panzerdivzionen*, no one would have dreamed to oppose the influx of these powerful units. On the other hand, you can have emerged as non appreciated German interference concerns and the role of the second floor that could be reserved for Italy in an Italian theater.

However, the stance of Gariboldi gave rise to discussions, requests for explanations and clarifications, to the point that Halder wrote directly to the superior Commander to indicate the tasks entrusted to Gause: keep the link between the OKH and the Comando Superiore; dealing with the latter all problems concerning *Afrikakorps* Terminology, as of course of interest; organize the logistical apparatus of the *Afrikakorps* and collaborate with (on Rintelen on German transport from Italy to

Libya⁽¹³⁵⁾. Gariboldi acknowledged receipt⁽¹³⁶⁾, then turned to the Comando Supremo:

“Send a letter now (with Appendix 1 translation) received by General Halder, Chief of staff of the German army in which they mentioned the duties that general Gauseo would have.

Given that it does not explain how the German Chief of staff talk directly to me and that I don't feel the need for this new body, I answered that I posted (annex 2) and observe:

1st-I do not think it is appropriate that I should have direct relations with the German general staff because this would lead to a dependency problem and possible dissonances with the views of this command;

2nd-which doesn't seem useful for the slenderness of the relationships that intrude a new organ between me and General Rommel, with whom relations, through the German connections officer, you are always carried out in a more than satisfactory and helpful.

I am waiting for the decisions and orders of this Supreme Command expressing a desire that I be made even more difficult the exercise of my command, already quite delicate”⁽¹³⁷⁾.

Meanwhile, even by von Rintelen were specified the functions of the *Deutscher Verbindungs-offizier beim Italiener Oberkommando North Afrika* (German liaison officer at the Italian Comando Superiore in Northern Africa). The German chain of communications was, therefore, as follows: OKW-German General at the Italian Comando Supremo (Gen. von. Rintelen)-Liaison Officer at the Comando Superiore A.S. (Gen. Gause)-*Deutsches Afrikakorps* Command. By Gause had to be the Commander of the German rear (Gen. Miiller-Gebhard) and leader of the Intendenza (Maj. S.M. Schleussner)⁽¹³⁸⁾.

The formal written clarifications that repeated those of Halder, von Rintelen, in a conversation with the 16 June, Cavallero had added verbal clarifications. At first the OKW had decided to establish a second Chief of staff of Gariboldi, but, later the idea was abandoned for fear that you could think of interference. German automotive use”. Needed to be very clear that the Guzzoni -Keitel Protocol was in full force and that Gause concerned simply to the organic and logistical issues of Terminology⁽¹³⁹⁾.

On 14 June, on the eve of the battle of Sollum, Roatta arrived in Benghazi. Contacted Gariboldi, they intend to visit

the Italian large units. The 21st, at the road inspectors house of Umm er-Rzem, at the height of the Gulf of Bomba, met with Rommel and Gause for an exchange of views. The interview was reported a few days later to Cavallero ⁽¹⁴⁰⁾. In summary, Rommel, declared good relations with Gariboldi and Gambara, had admitted that, especially with his small command, was struggling to hold the direct command of the two German divisions and four Italians to his orders. Initially, he saw an Italian Corps in charge of the siege of Tobruk and one German-Italian (German commander) on front of Sollum-Sidi Omar. Later you could have an Italian Corps at Tobruk, another Italian on the border and the *Afrikakorps* in hand, as armored reserve. The "Commander" question had not taken a position, merely to observe that nothing would not remain merely at the head of the German Corps, as to assume overall command of course with the consent of the OKW. In this regard, Roatta added that Gariboldi had for the moment decided to leave things as they were so that, on the occasion of the next likely opponent retry, Rommel, unhooked from direct responsibility of Tobruk, employed his troops only to profit the Egyptian front. Later, after the crisis provoked by a new enemy offensive or vanished this eventuality, Gariboldi was thought to entrust to Rommel commanded two groups of divisions (one Italian in charge of border defense and German mobile) and to assign the investment of Tobruk a third Italian group, Comando Superiore dependent.

It was important the full availability of an armored reserve, represented at the time by the 5th light and 15th *Panzer*. The crisis was severe-Rommel had recognized, and on this occasion a warm appreciation for the behavior of Italian units that had fought at Sollum-but there was to think that the lesson had to crush the enemy's ambitions: "*the British have suffered a blow, but it must be realized that the scale was very swinging*". Until they were ready forces and armored vehicles to capture Tobruk ⁽¹⁴¹⁾, there was that to put in the best conditions possible to nip new stronger English attacks. Tobruk, according to Rommel, deserved another bid. Only in the event that the enterprise did not succeed they could think of to keep the fort "encapsulated", while proceeding towards the East" the collection of forces needed

would take from six to eight weeks. If the attack had failed, four divisions would be necessary and sufficient to block the fort during the movement towards Egypt. But, in that regard, Roatta had the impression that Rommel had not yet studied the matter, merely to distinguish not possible before the end of November. Gause had obviously talked about shipping: ignored the Tunis-Bisena issue and believed that the crux of the matter was exclusively in exhaust possibilities of Tripoli and Benghazi, instead of in the difficulties that the R. Marina encountered in providing convoys escorts. Clarified the terms of the case persuaded-and with him Rommel-convenience of Tunisian solution. How was strangely conducted dialogue between Italy and Germany is supported by some comments made by Roatta to Cavallero in the letter of transmission of the report ⁽¹⁴²⁾:

“(...) I received your communication No. 39741 sheet/Sv of the 21st current with which gives precedence to Germanic transport 14,765 men, 2.635 trucks and 38,000 tons of materials ⁽¹⁴³⁾.

There appears no longer speaks of routing, via Tunis, by Germanic troops, but only to pass that on to 20,000 Tons German material.

You are the only judges in that regard: it must be clear that with the system (which might as well as recurrence) to give priority to Germanic, our transport are increasingly suffering.

At some point, on the side of completely efficient and Germanic troops increased, there would be more than the remnants of Italian troops present. So really the war in Libya “would be given” German Army contract, which it wants to and must avoid.

From an sheet Scuero-even if arrive in communication-that is the passage for Italy by French troops to Syria. But if so, why cannot the Italian troops to transit to Tunisia? (...)”.

Then Roatta began his inspection tour. In part the moral and material situation of the units, his main interest was aimed at tanks. Medium tank battalions (VII, VIII and IX) had not yet gathered in the 4th infantry regiment, although the *measure* had been prepared by the Ministry of war, and the 8th Battalion had just reached the *Ariete*. Since the State of the wagons did not seem comforting -12 tanks in repair, 19 scattered along the Trigh Capuzzo in recovery and 11 online at fort Capuzzo -Roatta demanded a detailed report. The incidents complained were many. restricting ourselves to

main: low power motor; defective lubrication with huge pressure lowering (each 50 km it was necessary to change the oil); insufficient water circulation; oil filters to clean every two hours; aspiring air filters with obvious consequences in sand, cylinders; warheads with continually changing gaskets for the tightening of the bolts, with impressive reduction of compression of the engine; poorly efficient electrical system; change too delicate; turret: easy break of gear shaft sliding roller, for poor quality material. After a similar technical framework, Rahman wanted a direct confrontation between four *Panzer* III and M 13. Two tests: one speed and one shot. The first was grim: the *Panzer* departed heading rapidly towards the finish line; of the M 13, two left, one struggled for a few yards then stopped, the fourth waddled slowly arriving midway when the *Panzer* were already at the destination. The shooting was pitiful: German tanks opened fire (six shots per piece) regularly on a carcass of a *Matilda*; the M 13 managed to shoot only some shot, about 24 available for jams at the cannon. Roatta “*turned away beyond chewing on bitter and vowing us I follow through that (...) wouldn't have had peace since that hadn't managed to equip the Italian army with a tank most decent armed*”⁽¹⁴⁴⁾. Unfortunately there will.

Operational topics on which Cavallero had requested the opinion, after long talks with Gariboldi and after a thorough examination, was referred to the Comando Supremo with three separate studies, whose essential elements are as follows.

The capture of Tobruk was seen through two phases: one “preliminary” to gradually erode the defense and the stamina of the fort with action entrusted especially to the artillery and aviation, as well as for threaten supply routes with aerial surveillance, constant laying of mines, raids and ambushes of light vessels; a “final stage” to be carried out by one or more problem with the flanks. For the operation were deemed necessary: four armored divisions (5th light, 15th *Panzer*, *Ariete* incomplete and another); five infantry divisions (*Brescia*, *Pavia*, *Bologna* and *Savona*, plus another); a motorized Division (the *Trento*, incomplete); a variety of supports artillery and engineers; 47 different squadrons of various types⁽¹⁴⁵⁾. Since the first phase was still required the intervention of the Air Fleet of Sicily and of X *Fliegerkorps*.

About any landings in Tripolitania had been taken into account the possibility of *commando* actions with tasks of disturbance is to landings of large forces in the vicinity of the ports of Tripoli and Benghazi. For the first type of offense seemed sufficient a dozen battalions truck portable, well armed, to bring the safety and to the extent necessary on the stretch of coast where the RAID occurred; for the second, on the other hand, the requirement was considered equal to two divisions truck portable and appropriate air force, able to flow in a timely manner.

The offensive into Egypt had been designed purely as a guide only. In fact the power crisis and note of influx of forces from Italy, the urgent need to provide for needs of defensive nature, the randomness of formulating long-term operating designs with the risk to be then confronted with very different situations than those provided, were all factors which induced to study this issue only in General and with broad margin of approximation. It was to achieve the goal to break the continuity of the British Empire and seizing the Suez Canal, to acquire the ability to act thoroughly in Asia, in Africa and on the oceans. The operations were seen in a sequence of three stages, virtually without interruption: conquest of the oases of Siwa and Jaghbub, starting from the South of Tobruk and Sidi Omar. conquest or, according to circumstances, encapsulation of Marsa Matruh, starting from the Sollum-Siwa front; marching to Cairo and the Canal, but only observe Alexandria and avoiding to become lost in the Delta. Altogether it took 17-19 divisions: 6-7 armored, 7-8 motorized, 4 infantry. All air forces stationed in Sicily, Greece, Crete and Libya, under single command and under the orders of the Commander of the Army, were to support the action. Similarly, the Commander of the army was to have direct dependencies to all light ships in charge of undermining the British naval forces tending to beat from the sea our columns.

However, the reinforcements to be sent to Africa were such and so many as to make impossible a practical calculation about the time needed for the preparation of operational tool. At the current pace of maritime transport would come at least autumn 1942. And there was to consider the possibility that the British troops in Egypt were increased noticeably. "*Shaping Up*

an event of this kind,-stated the study-would be embarking on an offensive against Egypt from East, measure judged, moreover, extremely desirable, if not the only really decisive in any circumstances."

Given the circumstances, Roatta could not think an offensive towards Alexandria unless such an eventuality far. Even the capture of Tobruk was conceivable in the short term, being conditioned by the availability of forces far greater than those of the moment, which also absorbed by the need to defend the frontier. He declared himself convinced that the opponent would be tried far more consistent offensive-and that all the commanders in Libya were agree-before you even be able to take possession of Tobruk: various clues (number of ships, artillery activity, frequent hand shots against our positions) were to divide the fort, strengthened in its defensive arrangement, supplied materials that were deficient results upon withdrawal from Cyrenaica. He initiated now towards a more active participation in the fight, in the overall framework of the British attitude in the theater. Had been found, moreover, that the forces of the garrison of Tobruk were supposed to act on June 16 in the direction of Bardia, in the plan of operation *Battleaxe*, and that only the rapid failure of the attack on the border had made the order.

In essence, the immanent problem was not already one of the offensive but that of Defense, seen in his five main aspects: Defense Advanced fronts (Eastern front and front of Tobruk), defended on backward positions (Gazala, *uadt*. Derna), Interior defense, coastal defense, Defense (if any) of the Western frontier.

Advanced defense needed to have adequate mobile reserve, located between Tobruk and Sollum. Also was urging concretely strengthening the two fronts and have some Division to give the change to more units provided. As long as these measures are not improved, the overall organization had to be considered precarious advance and, until it was placed over the troop needs of advanced, faces appeared questionable convenience to maintain unity on lagging positions: it was necessary to avoid splitting forces, which would involve the risk of weak everywhere.

internal control, then, you could provide more effectively with mobile units that can be used also for another purposes, rather than the fixed garrisons, except, of course, to the distant location. It became so advantageous to disengage the *Bologna* from the current territorial tasks in *gebel* to insert it into the device and also an advanced Cyrenaica. With regard to coastal defense, the Act seemed sufficient to fend off small landing attempts clearly insufficient, instead in front of most entities attempts. Moreover, it was impossible for the moment, send by appropriate and sufficient forces Italy to fill this gap. Finally, the hypothesis, on the other hand, a purely theoretical attack from Tunisia, Tripolitania's forces were judged insufficient.

The issue was addressed by aviation decision. The reinforcement of the 5th Air Fleet was essential: the bulk in Cyrenaica to defend advanced fronts, a part close to Benghazi and Tripoli's reach. Gen. Aimone-Cat had declared to be in a position to receive, upon sending logistical equipment, a reinforcement of two groups of fighters and six of bombers.

The memo ended Recalling explicitly as the pace of transport, irrespective of the weather conditions and by opposing offenses, was inextricably tied to tangible assets of absolute value: tonnage of vessel speed, routes, Commons, loading and unloading capabilities of ports. It follows from all of these elements was that by adopting appropriate measures in the choice of routes and port in your organization, it would not significantly exceeded the average. 6,000 tons per day (4,000 to 2,000 in Benghazi and Tripoli), excluding non-infusible fuels: a figure that pleased ordinary supplies would leave little scope for expansion. Without the advent of new conditions, which change substantially the naval situation in the Mediterranean (neutralization of British fleet), or allow the use of new supply shorter lines and safer (Bizerte) we certainly lost the race on time with the opponent and, rather than reach a timely force superiority, we faced the superiority of the enemy.

As you can see, the memo of what has already been confirmed Roatta represented by the staff of the army and the major thought leaders was in keeping in General. But

the Army Chief of staff, in addition to allowing a joint examination with the top commander and the Commander of the *Afrikakorps*, responds to a specific need: the question of superior Commander, matter, mind you, not arising from dissatisfaction with the work of the person concerned but from a significant balance. Roatta observed, listened ⁽¹⁴⁶⁾, then expressed his own opinion to Cavallero:

“The pairing GARIBOLDI-GAMBARA has *not* matured in the sense that it was hoped, they generally do in comparison of Rommel.

The GARIBOLDI, despite being very pleased with the GAMBARA (expected-he says- have to do with three madmen: Rommel-Gambara- Manca ⁽¹⁴⁷⁾), but he is convinced, to the test of facts, that the crazies is reduced to two, while Gambara is a collaborator of exception and very balanced) offers a passive resistance to the proposals of Gambara. This does not in principle let alone for ineptitude (since he has clear mind and professional capacity), but for attachment to what has been done previously, to susceptibility and theme that you want to take your hand.

I understand that any proposed significant GAMBARA, must be submitted to GARIBOLDI with 'security measures', in other words, step by step, and that acceptance of it is pure for degrees and-often-with limitations. Whence late and sometimes incomplete measures. This drawback, less severe in the current period of stasis, but very serious in intense period of operations.

GARIBOLDI, glad-repeats-the work does not seem GAMBARA notice of this situation. Appears convinced that the improvements varied order notes are a result of combines dynamism with sensible brake GAMBARA GARIBOLDI.

GAMBARA is quivering and impatient of the situation, he paints even more acute than they are. Is determined to do anything to get out of it.

With regard to Rommel the Supercomando is wary. GARIBOLDI part from the assumption that we must get along with ROMMEL at any cost; and so, in essence, does not give him direct orders (because those that are solely the result gives, on paper, of verbal quotes, agreements in which ROMMEL had the decisive role).

The only effective form of exercise of command, against ROMMEL, is the Italian items from dispensing ROMMEL as required.

It certain contributes to the attitude that GARIBOLDI compared ROMMEL's the feeling of 'inferiority complex' of the first, for the fact of not having even larger units and Italian media so modern armed and plentiful as Germanic ones, and to the slowness of important new contributions from the Motherland. Feeling that also have many other commands and Italian units in N.A..

However, despite GARIBOLDI hesitation, huge improvements have been made in N.A. and others are in progress (command organization of the sector, sub sector and coastal defense fort and flak-hunting out of units and individuals without employment- intendenza and services-

transport and road-use movement of artillery-defensive strongholds-materials-recovery exploitation-ports etc. etc.). And the arrival of G.U. or efficient Italian units will give greater opportunity to Supercomando to assert itself against the Germans.

Nevertheless, all in all, it seems that the current pairing should be loose, if not immediately (for obvious reasons of moral character) within the time frame that this judge appropriate what that the C.S. in terms of the paring, what is more, for decision and activities, is without any doubt the GAMBARA, in which you have the impressive improvements indeed mentioned. It is therefore highly recommended that remains in place.

But how? The GAMBARA, having excellent cloth of the Commander, is brought to control him and impatient-as already mentioned-of the current situation. You could then take into serious consideration the possibility to entrust to him the command of the forces in N.A.; command that he could hold up very well (GAMBARA is intimately focused on this, and basically if more or less awaits you soon).

If this measure, for reasons of grade and seniority and the consequent repercussions of moral order on the high paintings of the army, was not deemed possible, not the other way would be to entrust the command to a person who, knowing the qualities characteristic of GAMBARA, and having full confidence, let him wide freedom of action.

That person, give the previous, could be his excellence BASTICO”⁽¹⁴⁸⁾.

Two days later arrived the following telegram: Gariboldi

"After the successful conclusion of operations in terms of Sollum held in mid-June and after resettlement action that you created under your guidance, I accomplished your mission requirement.

While thank you for the work profitably carried out, I inform you that I have appointed to replace you in the Government of Libya and the *Comando Superiore* Armies of *Forze* A.S.I. Army General Ettore Bastico, which will transfer required in the next few days.

You pass at my disposal for the tasks which We will operate.
Cavallero.⁽¹⁴⁹⁾

We will see that the Gen. Bastico will try to impose his authority on Rommel in the operative field, which will inevitably lead to some friction⁽¹⁵⁰⁾.

So, after Graziani, closed loop Gariboldi.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

- (1) The works were directed by Comando Superiore Engineers and workers had to be brought soon to 2,300, framed in eight workers companies and a miners company. It must be said that it was not for naught Gariboldi satisfied workers companies. Already the first of the month had written to the engineers, meaning that he had personally encountered too much relaxation of these units: *"while you sit chatting, smoking, others to the front offer their blood for the Fatherland, the delay in the worker's task can be fatal for those who are fighting, delaying the arrival of supplies, (, etc.)."* (DSCSAS, f. 5.5.1941 date 01/6963).
 - (2) DSCSAS, (f), 294/41 14, 5.1941 date of DAK. Rommel, however, did not say that Tobruk stopped in transit on their way to some fifty Balbia miles: twenty-five within the defensive walls and a dozen for part medium range artillery action of the fort. This forced the flow of supplies and vacate and troop movements to and from the border to pass through the bottleneck formed arc enveloping desert track Tobruk from the South with disastrous attrition and loss of an entire day of free time where, Tobruk, the path would have exceeded the Balbia in an hour, This state of affairs will last until construction is completed, the "Axis Roadway", i.e. in August,
 - (3) The title of *"Halfaya pass"* into common usage, is improper because it is not a hill, but a simple incision in the rim of the Ridge, at the head of one of the *uidian* leading down to the sea. The rolling stock was first coast along sloping spurs of the sea, then through this incision.
 - (4) On 26 April, the S, I, M. cabled Comando Superiore N.A.: *"confirms British Egypt Environments next British counteroffensive accompanied by landing reinforcements Tobruk. Second unchecked news would transfer in Western desert of armored divisions, in addition to 7th Armored Division and traveling by sea, new Indian contingent direct Marsa Matruh & Tobruk, About 500 trucks would come via Cairo Suez & started towards the Western desert."*
 - (5) J, CONNELL, op. cited, p, 476,
 - (6) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 376.
 - (7) *ibid.*, p. 377.
 - (8) DSCSAS, report on the meeting.
 - (9) The convoy, the first to attempt passage through the Mediterranean since the X *Fliegerkorps* had been installed in Sicily, consisted of five merchant ships loaded with 295 tanks and 53 Hurricane, passed through the Strait of Gibraltar at night on 6 May and headed for the Strait of Sicily escorted by Force H (aircraft carrier *Ark Royal*, *Battleship Renown*, 1 cruiser, and 9 destroyers) of Adm. Somerville, with reinforcements for the Mediterranean Fleet (battleship *Queen Elizabeth* and 2 cruisers) conducted by Adm. King and from units sent from Malta meeting (1 Cruiser and 2 destroyer). The passage of the Strait of Sicily was carried out in the night of the 8th, at this point *Force H* turned back (dusk of the 7th) and came upon the Group's 75 *Beaufighter* No. 252 from Malta (first hours of the 8th).
- Alexandria had left two convoys with supplies for Malta and the *Mediterranean Fleet* to complete: the aircraft carrier HMS *Formidable*, the battleships *Warspite*, *Barham* and *Valiant*, 3 cruisers, 1 mine-layers and all the available destroyers, Of two convoys, one was slow (two tankers escorted by two anti-aircraft cruisers, three

Destroyers and two corvettes) and one fast (four merchant ships escorted by 3 cruisers and 3 destroyers). The cruisers to escort these convoys, arrived at the height of Pantelleria, were to join in Adm. King. The *Mediterranean Fleet* with Adm. Cunningham was ready to take over *Force H*.

The main moment of danger was formed by the passageway for the Strait of Sicily, mainly due to the presence of mines. In fact, despite a raid by Italians and Germans fighters and fighter-bombers, the loss of a merchant ship, with 57 tanks and 10 aircraft, was caused by the explosion of two mines.

From Italy, Supermarina learned belatedly and movements the fleet, ready to sail in three hours, was not made out because the bad weather and poor visibility prevented aerial reconnaissance to the identification and clarification of the real texture of the enemy.

(10) Formed on 11/2/1941 in Egypt as 22nd Inf. Bd, took the name of 22nd Guards Bd. on 20/3/1941.

(11) The 7th Arm, Bd. It was actually a training Brigade.

(12) D. VICINI, *L'8° bersaglieri e la guerra in A.S*, Iamari, Bologna 1977, p. 100. The Lieutenant Commander of the German company escaped towards advanced group, he give a motorcycle and, passing through Sollum Alta, reaching Bardia. Like many fighting in the desert, this too has been featured in various versions, which often, although envisaged by the protagonists, are at odds with each other. For example, the Commander of the 4th *Royal Tanks*, Lt. Col. O'Carrol, stated that the Halfaya pass "*was entirely Italian garrison after a short but resolute resistance-primarily by Italian gunners, who always were brave opponents-the tanks arrived on aim and communed with the Scots Guards to come forward and the Halfaya pass was in our hands*". (LIDDELL HART, *The tanks*, vol. II, Kassel, London, 1959, p. 78).

(13) "as quick and sudden was the attack the Italians were learning. Like *Matilda* overcame the walls and other obstacles, directed the Gunners aims towards the wombs of the tank and marked seven victims. (BRYAN PERRETT, *The Matilda*, I. Allen, London, 1973, p. 637.

(14) According to the command of the *Afrikakorps* things were in a completely different way. At 17:00 of the 15th Chief of the G.S., Lt. Col. von dem Borne-obviously in perfect good faith-the Comando Superiore that phoned to the "Halfaya pass a German company surrounded resists again." Only the next day, at 11:55, Liaison Office of DAK said that defenders. Halfaya who fiercely ten. they were Italians. Probably caught tonight. (DSCSAS, tele 421 16.5.1941 date).

(15) DSCSAS 15.5.1941 date.

(16) A. WAVELL, Third Despatch cited, p. 3441.

(17) D. IRVING, op. cited above, p. 113.

(18) It is the II/24th artillery Corps, commanded by Maj. Gen. Frongia, who a few days earlier had received praise from Rommel for his conduct in battle and then falls fatally hit in front of Tobruk.

(19) Are added to part the accreditations, the following pieces of personal letters sent to Col. Montemurro: "... I'd be happy to still have my dependencies in the coming fighting your brave Regiment. (by Rommel on July 4); "... If I got the highest German decoration, I must to

behavior of his beautiful and valorous Regiment and his wonderful staff intervention. (von Herff, dated 11 July) and, again: "... Last week I received from Gen. Gariboldi. silver medal at V. M. ...This beautiful Italian decor I must to you and I will always remember the battles together on the Egyptian border. (by von Herff, dated 26 July).

(20) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, pp. 379-380.

(21) In the area of Dar el-Hamra had been identified by the company of DAK shut a armored group, one infantry battalion, a battalion searching and two-three artillery groups.

(22) Around 7,000 men, cleared initially on Crete, were then transferred to Egypt.

(23) On the island had been concentrated 16,000 Italian prisoners of war.

(24) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited., p. 314.

(25) Ibidem, p. 317.

(26) E. VON RINTELEN, op. cited above, p. 132.

(27) To R. Marina had been prompted an intervention against the English fleet to assist in the operation, but Supermarina was opposed to sending the Fleet into the Eastern Mediterranean because, in its opinion, it would have resulted in the release of the *Mediterranean Fleet* from Alexandria, which would have risked compromising the operation Merkur, based essentially on surprise.

(28) In fact, the dead and the missing were 800.

(29) On this occasion the *Stukas* not looked much for the subtle and also took with the torpedo boat *Lupo*, who emerged unscathed. and with the destroyer *Sella*, which with four other ships carried Germanic troops to Candia and emerged unscathed: 5 killed and 32 wounded.

(30) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 329.

(31) A. SANTONI and F. MATTESINI, op. cited above, p. 88.

(32) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 336.

(33) Ibidem, p. 337.

(34) During the early days of the crisis, von Rintelen was commissioned by the OKW to transmit to Mussolini the urgent request of Goering of a Italian landings on the eastern side of the island, to come to the aid of hard effort, the German Leader declared himself ready and certainly did not have a word on the previous refusal" (E. VON RINTELEN, op. cited, p. 132). It was so hastily determined participation of 9th Italian infantry, stationed in the Aegean, reinforced with light tanks and two companies from landing of R. Marina. Landed the 28th under the protection of naval and air units, in the Bay of Sitia, advanced rapidly towards the Interior and 31st made contact with the Germans at Hierapetra.

(35) I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 147.

- (36) LIDDELL HART, *Stona di una sconfitta*, cit., p. 278.
- (37) It should be noted that at the beginning of May, Mussolini had the idea to send planes to Iraq, but the Vichy Government had opposed and that of Berlin had supported the French.
- (38) I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 333. To detect that in Churchill (op. cited, p. 303) the sentence "will be decided only after the end of Operation Barbarossa" "shall be replaced by" this is still on the knees of the gods".
- (39) In the second half of May were sent to Iraq 14 Bf. 109 and 7 He 111 commanded Fliegerführer Irak, Col. W. Junck.
- (40) The first political move of De Gaulle as leader of the Free French Forces "had been the establishment of the Defence Council of the French Empire". From De Gaulle, residing in London, also depended on: a General delegate to the Levant (Lebanon, Syria, Jabal al-Druze); a High Commissioner for Africa «free» France (Equatorial Africa, Chad, Cameroon, Gabon, Middle Congo, Ubangui-Chari); a Governor for French establishments of India (Yanaon, Mahé, Paola Carical, Chandernagor) and High Commissioner to the Pacific (Tahiti, New Hebrides, New Caledonia, friendship, Clipperton Islands).
- (41) The meeting had taken place on 11 May, but nothing had been said at the Italy of the interview.
- (42) J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 462.
- (43) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 366.
- (44) A. WAVELL, Third Dispatch cit. p. 3440.
- (45) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 367.
- (46) Ibidem, p. 373.
- (47) Diary Cavallero, 20.4.1941 date.
- (48) Diary Cavallero, unsigned and Petite with corrections in pen and pencil. On the issue of Supreme Command over the years 1941-42 see. LUCIO CEVA, Italian war conduct, Feltrinelli, Milano 1975.
- (49) R.D.L. June 27, 1941, no. 661.
- (50) According to the D.L. No. 68 February 6, 1927, with changes by law July 13, 1939, no. 1178 and October 18, 1940, no. 1550 after approval, it was the head of Government to communicate the directives to the Ministers, who transmitted to the chiefs of staff of armed forces.
- (51) Diary Cavallero, minutes undated letters.
- (52) Diary Cavallero, 26.5.1941 date.
- (53) The study of S.M.E., uff. II operations on 23.4.1941.
- (54) DSCS, f. 9044/0 p. 6.5.1941 date.

- (55) 25,000 men and 5,000 vehicles, with a rate of 5,500 men and 1,000 vehicles for the month of June and 11,000 men and 1,000 vehicles for the next few months.
 - (56) when there were eight Italian divisions in N.A.. of which three to be linked to Tobruk, so only five available for the offensive.
 - (57) Diary Cavallero. Date 25/5/1941
 - (58) In May had entered the battleship *Duilio*, damaged by incursion on air November 1940 Taranto; in mid-June the *Vittorio Veneto*, damaged in the battle of Gaudio in March 1941.
 - (59) DSCS, f. 40035/0 p. 14 date 6.1941-annex 6.
 - (60) Diary Cavallero, date mentioned.
 - (61) Diary Cavallero.
 - (62) fact-sheet n. 11 data 1.6.1941, vds. A. COCCHIA, op. cited above, pp. 202-205.
 - (63) A. COCCHIA, op. cited above, pp. 205-206.
 - (64) Diary Cavallero.
 - (65) The Vichy Government had permitted the use of Bizerte to Germany.
 - (66) Intendasi «Toulon».
 - (67) Diary Cavallero.
 - (68) GALEAZZO CIANO, diary 1937-1943, Rizzoli, Milan 1980, p. 518.
 - (69) *ibid.*, p. 520.
 - (70) *Ibidem*, pp. 523-524.
 - (71) DSCS summary of interview Cavallero-Keitel.
 - (72) The May 14 Ribbentrop had told Mussolini that if Stalin had not been prudent c/a Russia will be overturned in a matter of three months ' (G. CYAN, op. cited, p. 512) and 21 June, Ciano noted, speaking of rumors about war with Russia: "*the Germans think that within eight weeks everything is finished*" (op. cited, p. 526).
- Moreover, when, in mid-June, on Gen. Roatta will travel to North Africa, on Gen. Zanussi, his companion, had an interview to Cyrene with Gen. Gause, arrived a few days before. Gause came from OKW and had to support a thesis clearly circulating within the German high command: "*I repeat that Russia's campaign won't last more than two or three months. We have taken all precautions to liquidate the game within/summer. Woe betide if it was! But it will be. Do not repeat the tragic mistake of Napoleon, let us not be surprised by the winter before we got rid of the enemy. And liquidated the business up there, we throw in the Caucasus on the Suez Canal and also the liquidation of North Africa. Then, finally, we will be free to turn with all our might against the British Empire (...)*". (GIACOMO ZANUSSI, *Guerra e catastrofe d'Italia*, Corso, Roma 1945, p. 119).

- (73) A company of II/62nd infantry, reinforced by a team from 45 and mortars from a platoon from 47/32 mining company and a battery from 100/17 of the 2nd rapid artillery.
- (74) The I/104th infantry, a battery of 88, a company of 37, a pioneer platoon, a 155 (French war booty).
- (75) Command II/62^o infantry, a rifle company reinforced by a team from 45 mortars and a platoon from 47/32;
- (76) A rifle company of II/62nd infantry, reinforced by a team from 45 and mortars from a platoon from 47/32.
- (77) One rifle company of the infantry I/61st;
- (78) Two platoons of 37 and a heavy machine gun from 20.
- (79) A company of OASIS, a platoon from 37, a machine-gun platoon and a German 88 and two batteries of artillery 2nd Italian riot police. The companies of the oases were formed for the protection of the great OASIS and were formed by young and selected items.
- (80) J. CONNELL, op. cited above, pp. 481-482.
- (81) Ibidem, p. 482. It is significant that Churchill in the face just a nod, generic, to his letter to Wavell and none to that of Dill to himself.
- (82) Bruiser means "overbearing person" and, in slang, "Boxer", ... The term wanted to allude to the exchange of telegrams on the transaction between London and Cairo.
- (83) It was the new medium tank, the *Crusader I*, from 19 tons, equipped with a 40-piece/52 and two machine guns from 7.92. Autonomy, about 160 km; speed, 44 Km/h. The front hull amour was of 30 mm, 14 mm side. The thickness of the turret was the 49 mm and 24 mm at the front side.
- (84) LIDDELL HART, *The Tanks*, cit., p. 84.
- (85) Ibidem, p. 86.
- (86) DSCS, communication on 15.6. 1941.
- (87) H.O. BEHRENDT, op. cited above, p. 105.
- (88) J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 499.
- (89) The idea was that the 4th Armored Brigade to attack southward and 7th to the northward.
- (90) To 06:55 had been intercepted a communication in English, according to which a group of 75 German heavy tanks were advancing on Sidi Suleiman.
- (91) E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, pp. 59-60.
- (92) According to the information provided by aerial and terrestrial observation, the German armored column advancing counted no fewer than 200 tanks and numerous artillery.

- (93) J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 500.
- (94) E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 51.
- (95) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited III part, vol. II, p. 35.
- (96) J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 500.
- (97) The missing of some should be at least equal to other prisoners.
The DAK was 319 English prisoners against 250 by Wavell and releases dispersed the latter report indicated 570 Italian and German prisoners against 403 missing resulting Italian Comando Superiore.
- (98) In particular the balance of materials made by DAK was the following. British losses: 10 pieces from campaign, 74 anti-tank pieces, 71 automatic weapons, 178 rifles and 20,000 different types of shots. German losses: 13 machine guns, 1 mortar, 3 AT Rifles, 3 anti-tank from 50, 3 anti-tank pieces of 37 and, a 20-piece, one from 75 and one from 180, 35 trucks.
- (99) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 385.
- (100) The evening of the 18th reported to Comando Superiore DAK the following situation of its efficient *tanks*: 53 Panzer of four types at the 5th regiment and 60 more than to 80, command tanks.
- (101) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 386.
- (102) Ibidem, p. 305.
- (103) was a conventional name for the offensive into Syria.
- (104) J. CONNELL, op. cit., p. 502.
- (105) A. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, pp. 388-389.
- (106) see footnote 16.
- (107) J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 505.
- (108) Churchill had not forgiven nor the aircraft efficient situation too low compared to the existing equipment in the Middle East, nor ... i doubt, clearly manifested, that in London does not make it really possible to assist the air force in the theatre of operations.
- (109) J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 502.
- (110) Third Dispatch cited, p. 3443.
- (111) B.H. LIDDELL HART, *Storia della seconda guerra mondiale*, Mondadori, Milano 1970, pp. 246-247.
- (112) The only change of call-signs is ineffective without specific detail arrangements. For example, certain units, despite this change, made reference to previous telegrams, specifying number of Protocol and data, transmitted with different name. Consequently, the identification of the units did not present difficulties

- On the other hand, too frequent changes would confuse any British unit (intercepted communications were like "I don't know who's BEAM", so that in moments of urgency were transmitted dispatches with the address and related service news citing the names of bodies and large units in the corresponding place names.
- (113) the coordinate of encryption achieved positions, but often unwary posts also services bodies and especially during the battle, such as: "we're sorry to announce the death of Rifleman X 2nd Scots Guards, occurred the day D as a result of firearm back wound to Campbell.
- (114) K.J. MACKSEY, operation Battleaxe, in AA.VV., history of the second world war, cit., p. 219.
- (115) on Rommel remarked: "*Italian ranks, in fact, made it a lot when it was led by a Valiant Captain*" (e. ROMMEL, op. cited, p. 62).
- (116) Wavell was alluding to the operation Brevity (15-16 May) and to recapture the Halfaya pass by the von Herff (27 May).
- (117) It ignores what pieces Wavell refers. Certainly not the 88 guns, whose presence in North Africa, although suspected, was not identified by the British (see PLAYFAIR, op. cited, p. 173).
- (118) W, CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 382.
- (119) reading while righteous reliefs made by Wavell on the causes of the defeat, You may not think the bitterness felt by Graziani took knowledge. A simple and easy readings and reports paraphrase Wavell concerning the battle of Sollum is still largely lower than the reality of battle of Sidi Barrani. The tenth army had no armoured cars, but simple even for moving trucks off the road in the wilderness; three-quarters of the more than 400 tanks, of which he boasted the destruction or capture the entire campaign, could hardly be compared with *Bren Carriers*; the tanks had a average speed of 30 km/h against the 24 of *Matilda* and 48 of the M 13; The discarded so easily by *Matilda* had the gun in casemate and weighed half of the opponent; the inexperience of the crew of M 13 Babini Brigade was definitely superior to that of the crews of the 7th Armored Division, everything apart, be clear, by undeniable errors of strategic vision and tactical conduct of combat by Graziani and leading his suborders.
- (120) E. ROMMEL, op.. cited above, pp. 61-63.
- (121) B.H. LIDDELL HART, op. cited above, pp. 250-251.
- (122) the anti-tank guns from 6 lbs. (57-50) began to replace those 2 lbs. until November 1941. 17 lbs cannons. (76/55), which were not available anti-tank in North Africa until January 1943,
- (123) the Panzer attacked at a speed of 20-25 km/h and the batteries from 25 lbs. employed approximately three minutes to prepare for the March.
- (124) the ability to armor-piercing projectile penetration from 2 lbs. was 40 mm of amour at 1,000 meters and 52 mm to 500 meters, however the chance of pointing to 1,000 meters and environmental conditions presented serious difficulties, especially if the target was moving. The pointing devices improved during the war, German ones first.

- (125) during operation Battleaxe, about one-third of the Panzer was equipped with the new piece, by 50/42.
- (126) in Berlin was Also calculated by ordinary supplies needs. The *Deutsches Afrikakorps* had 24,000 tones needed monthly, plus 9,000 allocated to the *Luftwaffe* in Libya, while there was no means of sending German troops overseas more than 20,000 tons per month. Halder noted in his diary: "*going beyond orders Rommel has led to a situation where our current supply capacity is insufficient*"; but the criticism appears excessive. It's all to prove that there are safe alternatives.
- (127) in data 10.6.1941-annex 7.
- (128) in data 12.6.1941-Annex 8.
- (129) DSCS, 14.6.1941 date reminders.
- (130) it was the major, then Lt. Colonel Heggenreiner, who had been seconded from von Rintelen, head of the German military mission in Italy, at the Comando Superiore supported then from Mar. Graziani. To remember that at the DAK operated an Italian liaison office held by gen. Calvi di Bergolo.
- (131) DSCS, f. 30001 op. 1.6.1941 date.
- (132) DSCS, f. 01/8116 Op 9.6.1941 Commander system.data above.
- (133), DSCSAS f. 52 15.6.1941 Commander date R.P. higher.
- (134) E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 46.
- (135) DSCSAS, 14.6.1941 date letter of the head of the German army-Sm Annex 9.
- (136), DSCSAS f. 53 18.6.1941 Commander date R.P. higher. Annexes omitted
- (137), 54 DSCSAS f. R.P. 19.6.1941 date of top commander.
- (138) DSCS, f. 275 14.6.1941 date of the German military attaché in Rome.
- (139) DSCS, f. 30069/0 p. 17.6.1941 date of the Chief of the General staff-annex 10.
- (140) Roatta Conference with gen. Rommel and Gause of 21.6.1941 – Annex No. 11.
- (141) Rommel considered indispensable two infantry divisions, as well as those already in place; some units of tanks in order to accompany the infantry; an increase of four Italian groups from 149/35 and two German groups, one of 150 howitzers and mortars from 120. In addition, of course, the greatest possible use of aviation and use of German "incendiary oil" bombs.
- (142) personal letter No. 19/6 25.6.1941 date.
- (143) with f. 39741/Sv. 21.5.1941 Supreme command date gave orders to Direzione Superiore Trasporti of S.M.R.E. to modify the program for the month of

July, giving precedence to the sending, by 20 July, personnel and materials mentioned. The expedition had been stressed by the OKW, and included regular supplies for the month of July: 30,000 tons for the *Afrikakorps* and 8,000 for *Fliegerfuehrer Afrika*.

(144) G. ZANUSSI, op. cited above, p. 124.

(145) 19 fighter squadrons, 16 of bomber, 8 of *Stuka* dive bombers, 1 to, 2 strategic reconnaissance, 1 by fighter-bombers.

(146) on this topic see G. ZANUSSI, op. cited above, pp. 125-127.

(147) on Gen. Ettore Manca di Mores was, from May 19, top commander of artillery.

(148) DSCS, personal letter on gen's 10.7.1941. Roatta.

(149) DSCS, personal letter on gen's 12.7.1941. Cavallero. Note the use of the prerogatives of the head of S.M.G.: the change of top commander is formally decided by Cavallero and not from. Mussolini.

(150) He remarked sharply that "*Italian For a curious revenge of history, Gen. Rommel was in front of Bastico and Gambara, in exactly the same situation in which the same Bastico and Gambara had faced Franco in Spain. Now the parties were reversed. When he wanted to make something of his head, unable to bring other topics, Bastico in Hispanic evoked in last appeal in front of Franco orders of the Duce like Rommel when he wanted to make his head pointed to the Führer's orders*" (op. cited, p. 485).

CHAPTER FIVE

THE OPERATIONAL PAUSE AFTER OPERATION BATTLEAXE

1. THE ITALIAN-GERMAN OPERATING UNDERSTANDINGS.

Before considering with which directives Gen. Bastico, from 18 July new top commander of the armed forces in North Africa, has been trying to do at work, you should highlight a decision taken at the Summit, whose gravity revealed-but it was not difficult to understand intuitively-too heavy for both new commitments and to sustain, both for existing burdens, which already was difficult to deal with. Since 30 May, before leaving for Brenner to meet Hitler, Mussolini had identified with Cavallero the need to *“to prepare the Constitution between Ljubljana and Zagabna of a motorized Division and a Grenadier Division”*, more in anticipation of a conflict between Germany and the Soviet Union. It is very likely it was a guideline rather than a genuine directive, however about ten days after the issue gained greater consistency with the decision to prepare a special Corps of two divisions truck transportable and speedy.

After some uncertainty of character ordering, between 15 and 21 June, was established to develop infantry Corps. The 22nd known the start of German operations and declared war on Russia, was beginning a hectic activity to equip the units properly staffed, materials (especially artillery and mortars) and means (especially trucks). Apart from the fact that, despite all efforts, the expeditionary force was far from getting a balanced and solid shape, in line with the operational commitments, undoubtedly is predictable «pillage» caused by his preparation for availability engraved upon Libya, just when, particularly in Rome, he had reason to believe a imminent British recovery offensive in Cyrenaica.

It is known that the immediate offer of Italian participation, forwarded through Gen. Marras, was not greeted with particular enthusiasm by the Führer, who had this to write: *“if that is your intention, Duce-that I welcome of course with our hearts filled with gratitude. - There will be enough time to realize (...)”*.

the decisive help, Duce, I can however always provide with strengthening your the French can March on France [= on Tunisia forces in North Africa, possibly even I looking from Tripoli to the West, with constitute a contingent for or now, albeit small, but now that in the event of a breach of the treaties by]: and finally, with the intensification of the air war and, where practicable, the submarines in the Mediterranean (...)”⁽¹⁾ to emphasize that for Hitler “*North Africa per se is subtracted at any danger until autumn (...). I don't think the English next time may be able to repeat this attempt*”, and that “*before the autumn cannot take into account the possibility of an attack on Egypt*”⁽²⁾.

Mussolini, as is natural, hastened to reassure his ally about the measures underway for North Africa, then, taking into account the change of top commander, was preparing by Cavallero directives for Bastico.

1st -the influx to I.N.A. of forces and media widely prepared in Italy and being increased, to restore the efficiency of our operating unit required or send new ones, find limitation in notes and transport difficulties in the limited performance of ports of landing.

2nd -on the other hand, British forces in Egypt are growing, in order to resume as soon as the offensive action against us; attempts at landing on the coasts of Libya are also possible, with special reference to areas of Tripoli and Benghazi.

3rd -This place, while it is expected that the Axis will develop a good time a contemporary double offensive action against Egypt, from Cyrenaica and the Middle East, such action must be postponed more propitious times, also in relation to the development of operations in Russia.

4th -In such anticipation you must:

a) to maximally enhance) the resistant attitude of Cyrenaica with units that are duly completed, having in mind that this can be implemented with complete submissions, that a price of great efforts will be made by Italy during the current month and the influx of new forces, albeit limited, will initiate in August;

b) treat the defensive organization on the eastern front and create a strong mobile reserve for the maneuver;

c) examine the command organization of the forces engaged on the eastern front and submit proposals aimed at obtaining a more agile operation of collection. Keep in mind the opportunity to establish, as soon as possible, an armored mobile group under the command of Gen. Rommel⁽³⁾;

e) prepare, especially with artillery and other means during start-up, the operation to capture fort Tobruk. Since this will require preparation time, continue systematic activities, meanwhile, a

kind of artillery and aviation, to undermine the physical and moral strength of the fort, hinder supplies by sea and prevent the garrison to compete actively in the attack from the East of Sollum;

f) with regard to Tripolitania, keep in mind that in the current situation, the greatest threat is that of a landing: therefore mainly oriented in therein forces sense of coastal defense;

g) every effort must be made to improve as much as possible the capability of landing [= discharge] of Tripoli and Benghazi and the Organization of anti-aircraft and air defense of such locations.

Is obvious prudential measure continue the design and organization of lagging positions already foreseen by this Comando Superiore positions that may be embolically garnished with elements drawn from Tripolitania and later, when that will be possible, with units in period of rest”.

Frankly, these directives appear contradictory in some respects and for other generic, Yes to feel better in their place a detailed plan for transport by sea and by air throughout the summer. First of all it is undeniable the strict mitigation sensitive sense of realism to the basis of the report and studies presented by Roatta. He had said bluntly that the capture of Tobruk was not even conceivable “*as a short-term operation*” and that the offensive towards the canal appeared to be “*a distant possibility*”, unless substantive changes in the naval situation in the Mediterranean, since the transport could barely meet the power needs of ordinary forces present in North Africa and were learn a ponderous enhancement plan. In other words, if you do not resolve the problem, the tactical logistics was a positive solution: make every effort with everything in place, resigned to wait for the new British offensive. The directives issued under the authority of the signature of the Duce, however, without anything to say with regard to a future intensification of supplies, made for a platonic abstraction statement of principle, they prescribed to ensure the defense of Cyrenaica and to prepare for the conquest of Tobruk, Roatta had declared operations impossible without a significant increase in ordinary and extraordinary supplies.

As an offensive against Egypt, it was postponed “*to more propitious*,” but without specifying whether in relationship to the time when Italy was able to resolve the issue of overseas transport, or at the end of the campaign of Russia, or when Germany had decided. Because this is precisely the point. Mussolini for the first time openly spoke of a gigantic pincer maneuver, one branch, German, would

acted through the Caucasus or from Turkey and the other Italian, mainly from Cyrenaica. And although it may seem-retrospective-chimerical especially such a vision, we must not forget that the command in Chief of the Middle East feared just such an eventuality, and need to know that von Rintelen, quoted in his July 2 memo, he wrote:

"It is the intention of the OKW to attack the British position in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, after the campaign in Russia has ended and only armored forces, he committed, are available for other theatres of war.

In the overall framework of operations requires the preparation of a powerful episode from Libya towards the Suez Canal. Since I am to expect numerous British supplies in the coming days, while the axis forces must be increased as much as possible (...)"

Von Rintelen was based on rumors, but on "education no. 32 dated 30 June" to him directly from OKW. Among the topics listed in this statement, there was also the *"continuation of the fight against the British position in the Mediterranean and the front Shaft by means of a concentric attack that must move from Libya through Egypt, from Turkey through Bulgana, and depending on the circumstances, also from Iran through Transcaucasta"* ⁽⁴⁾. This, of course, did not mean that there was a study in this regard: the issue would be dealt with in due time, i.e. when the campaign of Russia had reached a victory, at least in Europe, limits of absolute tranquility for Germany. Such guidance it entailed the full membership of the OKW. And in this sense we must interpret what had to declare Gen. von Thoma about situation in 1942 (von Kleist in the Caucasus and Rommel at el Alamein): "The large pincer movement against the Middle East that you had going on was not based on a real plan. It was vaguely discussed between generals closest to Hitler, but our general staff never approved nor not considered feasible" ⁽⁵⁾.

Grounds not groundless affirmation of Mussolini remains the feeling of a deliberately assumed operating in front wait-at the initiative of others-of the enemy or the ally-and, at the same time, some wishful thinking. This feeling seems confirmed by the memory on the political-military situation that one week after Mussolini introduced him to the King⁽⁶⁾. In it are explicit renunciation to a concrete effort to

change the unease of many in Libya, but “*a strong correction in the attitude of Turkey or other unpredictable events*”, and a mental orientation inspired by a general defense. Not only that, but next to the absence of any concern for supplies overseas and to decisions no connection with reality-such as the creation of a mass of maneuver in the Po Valley of at least 20 divisions and global availability in the spring of 1942 to “*at least 80 divisions*”, including five Armored and eight motorized, when the obstacle of any organic problem, tactical and logistical support, were trucks, artillery and tanks-seems increasingly clear interest in the Russian front. The first Corps had to add a second, motorized naturally “*more or less depending on chance*”! For sure, Mussolini did not think that preparing a second Corps was concerned that exhausted in three divisions put together. A new unit of this kind would have automatically created an army, and this would have resulted in the finding of several too many additional and the Intendenza. The mistake made by opening a Greek front, when Graziani already complained about difficulty, now was repeating.

Just a few days later, but before speaking with Rommel, Keitel turned to Cavallero with a long letter ⁽⁷⁾ where up-to-date news of the Russian front and thanked, on behalf of Hitler, of the offer “*if necessary*” of a second Italian Corps-confirmed, albeit in a distant perspective, the threat from the North on the Middle East and was reason to confirm the hypothesis of a British offensive in North Africa in the near future:

“However, certain that the British have recognized what greater danger threatens, at the end of the campaign-to the East, their positions in the Middle East. If will work correctly (as we must assume) they will be brought to try again in the coming months, the attack on the Cyrenaica (...).

It is not timely to establish, before Russia's campaign is over, the war plan of the axis powers against the British positions in the Mediterranean (...).

As soon as the operations in the East will come to a temporary conclusion a very glad to meet with you to secure the level of additional work. This plan will not be then dictated by the desire to rest on its laurels, but rather to use the inclusion of Russia as a base of operations in grand style in the Middle East, to improve the strategic situation of Italy(...)”

The central argument of the letter was fighting in Cyrenaica:

As regards the Northern Africa here's my idea:

1st -our efforts must be directed to the capture of Tobruk and the consequent destruction of the local British forces, with the aim of freeing and can then use the Egyptian frontier units currently engaged in encirclement.

2nd -the achievement of this objective is however hindered by the enormous difficulties of supplies by sea. The loss of heavy artillery and other units for the attack on Tobruk, following the recent sinking, is therefore particularly regrettable because it is not readily repairable.

3rd -If the British were to stick with preeminent forces before the capture of Tobruk, will be necessary, *in extreme cases*, withdraw forces west of Sollum and fronts of Tobruk, preferable procedure in each case to a defeat to the Egyptian border.

4th -the recognition of this possibility requires that you make possible at least to prepare backward positions starting approximately from Gazala in Southwest, protected the flanks from the area of el-Mechili by offensive actions conducted by mobile teams. All the better if such positions will not be used.

5th -Passing by those concepts in the preparation of the next rush against the Suez Canal, it was expected the participation of an armored group command under General Rommel who, in turn, is subject to your Commander, General Bastico.

As I learn from General von Rintelen, You agree that the Tobruk front remains in a first step, the dependence of General Rommel. Given the intimate connection of Sollum with that of Tobruk, I believe that this is the best solution.

If special reasons may however request later that Tobruk front passed to the immediate dependencies of the Italian Comando Superiore, Rommel armored group should be able to at least have, as well as African Expeditionary Force [= Afrikakorps] as a mobile reserve, also an Italian Corp (front of Sollum) and possibly even more rapid Italian formations (...).

As is easy to see, the most important point was not so much an examination of the hypothesis or defensive, even less, than offensive, because the strengthening of the forces in the hands of Rommel and the control unit on the two fronts of Sollum and Tobruk. On this specific topic Rommel reserved to discuss even in Berlin, because concerns had emerged in Africa ⁽⁸⁾. On the 28th, just party Rommel, Lt. Col. Heggenreiner expressed to Gambara at the German deep concern the next British attack could separate, albeit for a few days, Sollum from Tobruk as a result of articulation that Bastico had in mind to implement, as from precise provisions

received in Rome. Ultimately, apart from the wealth of opinions and suggestions and obvious tone of extreme courtesy, in the letter of Keitel doesn't see any mention any form of participation in the solution, or at least the easing of the severe crisis that filled our forces in Northern Africa. No wonder, given the immense task that Germany had taken ⁽⁹⁾. The importance of the Mediterranean theatre of operations had not been fully recognized by Hitler, however, it is undeniable that the Soviet presence could not be ignored for long. On the other hand, the OKW had expressed intentions to strengthen the series *Deutsches Afrikakorps*. The complaints, however, appears Italian valid on two subjects of major importance. One concerned the use of Bisena, and Keitel was limited to sentencing the need for an improvement of maritime transport and to affirm that "*we will continue to rely mainly on the Italian ports of Tripoli and Benghazi.*" The second concerned the request to grant Italian factories manufacturing Pzkw III and IV, and Keitel allowed hopes that would never be translated into reality.

General Bastico had departed from Rome on July 18, having already read the directives of Mussolini of the 16th and von Rintelen communication about the desire of the OKW to establish as soon as possible the command of the Rommel armored group, although incomplete. The next day, just arrived at Cyrene, had an interview with the Commander of the *Afrikakorps*, that was totally agree with the planned reorganization of the forces ⁽¹⁰⁾. Until the Constitution of investment Corps of Tobruk, he retained the responsibility of Sollum and the siege of the fort. Then, from 22 to 25, Bastico paid a visit to units of the Eastern Cyrenaica, accompanied by Rommel. Just returned to Cyrene compiled a detailed report sent to Cavallero with a personal letter:

"(...) I have endeavored to be objective and fair; but I have to agree with Rahman in the confirm that the situation is serious, because we are weak everywhere, and for how much effort trying to accomplish I am not given-for now-to put together a reserve capable of coping with every possible event. Due to lack of power and lack of vehicles; This failure that worsens every day; There would now at least 1000; then you would begin to "breathe" any so you think the good will and faith are not lacking; and all shall, in all circumstances, our duty.

But the Navy and air force to help us. For aviation, if you could count on at least five daily transport equipment, qualitative contribution-if

-quantity of materials not delivered would be valuable. It's not really possible to implement such a periodic transport? And the same goes for transport submarines; came to Rhodes and were expected and welcome. They could not come here too? Do you think this is just a cry of the heart!

As for talks with Gen. Rommel, while they gave me the feeling that by stating his certainty to face the events, he is in fact very concerned about the situation-Tobruk- Sollum - which he himself has created, I have been persuaded that he very rarely will waive the "autonomy"-which dare I say absolutely where it is used. Our talks in the past three days in his company were cordial, but, even if veiled by cordiality words, apparent in his reasoning, the «net» and undisputed superiority that he attributes to their forces in comparison with ours, judged objectively, it is true, but not without severity.

Now he goes to Berlin, but promised to return soon, and I believed him, faced opposition to his statement to be sure that the English attack is still pretty far (...) "⁽¹¹⁾.

The Italian divisions reported Bastico in the report-had poor efficiency and insufficient mobility ⁽¹²⁾. They were tired because they were with all items online, lacked any reserve the possibility to take advantage of rest shifts. Inevitably the judged less suitable Rommel to attack and tended to use them in the service of unnerving trench. In essence, they were intended to support the one opponent, while the German divisions remained in charge of the maneuver and the reconquest of static elements eventually overwhelmed. As regards operational dependencies, Rommel argued that, since the *Deutsches Afrikakorps*, the only mobile reserve for the two fronts of Sollum and Tobruk, these may be both under a single commander. In other words, all units operating against the English would be passed under the German commander. Apart from that, as a first measure intended to relieve the tension of the recognized situation at the Egyptian border, Bastico was designed to bring in Cyrenaica that is subtracted to Tripolitania ⁽¹³⁾.

Cavallero had in mind the directives of 16 July Mussolini, founded on the hope of being able to fulfill the commitments of the enhancement plan Libyan-Egyptian Theater; plan designed precisely according to the great offensive shooting toward the Nile. But the continued examination of the fix, looking for a solution that was not, the induced such a bitter caution. The July 29 on Gen. Magli, assigned to the Comando

Supremo, had chaired a meeting to define the shipping program for the month of August, Gen. von Rintelen. He was speaking at the opening session to underscore the inadequacy of fuel where the troops East of Tobruk and to remedy that shortcoming had been decided, as a preliminary point, that on each steamer headed for Benghazi, coming either directly from Italy and from Tripoli, were loaded with 500 tons of fuel. Calculating three ships per week, expected to send Cyrenaica at least 6,000 tons monthly. The August program was drawn up on the basis of four regular cargo convoys (of 24 ships, of which 4 of fuel, 10 for the Germans and 10 for the Italians), a cargo convoy vehicles only Italians (5 steamers), a fast convoy for Italian and German troops. Altogether 11,500 men had landed overseas, 2,700 vehicles and artillery, with which they would have strengthen the *Afrikakorps* ⁽¹⁴⁾ and R. Aeronautica, improved conditions in some divisions, achieved a significant increase in car repair (sending an entire fleet) and increase the availability of vehicles ⁽¹⁵⁾. In addition, towards the end of the month, was supposed to start the first part of the *Trieste* motorized Division. Everything, however, mostly was to be placed under the label of normal supplies. Those extraordinary remained out of reach.

Operationally Keitel's letter also betrayed underlying concerns: the 'worst case' of a strong British offensive deserved attention, so much so that, at least, acceptable the idea of a pre-emptive retreat rather than suffer a defeat at the border. These considerations were made assessments under the Comando Supremo, where on 23 July-when deemed highly credible news had indicated the British offensive begins between the 25th and 26th of that month-was even emerged doubt to fail to promptly withdraw the advanced device. Early August, however, had fallen fear of an imminent English initiative, apart from some local sustainable action without difficulty, and it was believed to be able to count on the margin of a month's time for the development of an organization capable of supporting the one enemy.

Italian-German units were still roughly the same who supported *Battleaxe*: had added only the incomplete

Savona Division, hastily transferred from Syrtica. The logistics situation remained very serious: it wasn't made even the modest increase planned for the month of July and, among other things, had lost two tankers and two heavy batteries aimed at the siege of Tobruk. The Comando Supremo was two fundamental questions. First: divisions besieging Tobruk, reinforced by that landed from Italy or given in place by Gen. Bastico, would be able to 'keep' in September, before departing to attack Tobruk? Three divisions faced the fort: *Brescia*, *Pavia* and *Trento*. Only the latter had received in July and would have received in August and complete accessories. Nothing for the *Brescia* and *Pavia* and ignored because they could be drawn from Tripolitania. All in all, however, it was assumed that such large units were able to resist, albeit part drawing upon probably also for armored reserve. If an attack was launched on the Sollum coinciding with the sortie from Tobruk, the cases were two. An action conducted with forces analogous to those used in *Battleaxe* could be stopped at the border. But if the opponent had acted with superior forces and, above all, a more broad range, from the East and Southeast, neglecting or only engaging Sollum, the chances of resistance appeared very uncertain. The axis device was, in fact, such an attitude of rest, waiting to resume their advance into Egypt. But this assumed advance an action from East to Suez and the Russian front operations placed the ruling rather distant prospect. Unable to increase the forces seemed so convenient a more defensive lineup, mainly economic, that would have any chance to fend off the main attack.

Second question: when transporting the *Trieste*, it would have been preferable to send major new units or to maintain or increase the efficiency of the divisions already in Libya? Given the difficulty of achieving scarcely ordinary supplies and divisional services conditions, now below the minimum acceptable for deficiency of trucks (the *Trento* had 80% of motor vehicles out of use), it was stated the concept of use in the best way the forces already overseas and not to proceed with the shipment of major new unit until the increased availability of vehicles and stocks do not allow logistics equipment

adapted to current and more strength. To ensure the efficiency of the divisions it was necessary to send them all the missing items (including divisional artillery), the artillery of Corps and Army Corps and divisional motor vehicles, Corps and Quartermaster. After that you could proceed to review the power of the theater. If it had been possible to create a convenient logistical support (and only after having developed) it became obvious the departure of major new unit, otherwise they remained that keep many local divisions, replacing the worn-out vehicles and personnel interchange and motorized as well as possible, in order to draw a few divisions maximum return.

From this complex arguments developed a note for Mussolini, aiming to highlight the need for pure and simple to prepare themselves to accept a defensive battle:

“In the context the Russian front to Germany, the war in the Mediterranean remained essentially entrusted to Italian weapons. It is therefore making every effort to enhance as much as possible air and ground forces stationed in Libya and this address has also found expression in the directives to General Bastico for you, Duce, signed on 16 July:

“enhance as much as possible the resistant structure of Cyrenaica and act systematically against Tobruk to prepare for the capture and keep the Organization-as a measure of -prudential rearward positions”.

The current deployment of our forces in Libya has the following features:

- in Tripolitania: no mobile units able to act where appropriate in the border of Tunisia (the only large unit the *Sabratha* Div. in reconstitution and devoid of means of transport);
- in Cyrenaica: three divisions (*Brescia*, *Trento* and *Pallia*) immobilized in front of Tobruk; a (*Ariete*) committed to protecting their backs to that faced by any landings and which face the same reserve; to the East a Division (*Sallona*) and the German mobile reserves (two armored divisions) also linked to the front of Tobruk.

We have a good lineup that responds to a temporary halt pending our elimination of Tobruk and then resume the offensive towards East.

But three new facts that have occurred to change the situation:

- the slow progress of operations in Russia, which moved to distant times the possible beginning of the common offensive towards the Suez Canal;
- the refusal of Bisena, which does not allow us to and we will bring in the necessary reinforcements to Libya means and forces us to return to the distant attack date of Tobruk;

-the new attitude of the Vichy Government after the events of Syria and intensified DeGaulist propaganda in French North Africa, which we must also caution measures towards the Tunisian frontier.

In those circumstances, it is logical to expect that the enemy (as agreed and extensive information confirm) tries to take advantage of this situation to attack us as soon as possible in Cyrenaica, especially since it can be assumed to rise against us, in case of victory, French North Africa.

English already stated purpose: to buy the domain over the entire Mediterranean coast of Africa.

It is not so now for us to capture Tobruk and attack Egypt, but you can give a victorious battle in Cyrenaica.

The enemy will attack supposedly against the front of Sollum and exit from Tobruk.

Our divisions investing Tobruk are able to resist, and so too can resist, at least in the first half, our defensive line to Sollum. But this fight on double sided will absorb the mobile reserve (Rommel Corps) at least for most; so will miss the mass of maneuver to thwart the opponent's main action, action that will manifest itself necessarily with mechanized forces operating at outreach.

Therefore it must be concluded:

a) only if the enemy attack was conducted with a of near equivalent forces to those engaged in June, there is the possibility for us to respond to the attack;

b) but if the enemy, as is very likely, to act with superior forces (operation outreach) we feel very difficult that the current deployment would successfully lead the battle.

It seems therefore appropriate to:

-in Cyrenaica: prepare a more logical collection of forces so he could give battle in tactical and logistical conditions are favorable;

-in Tripolitania: obtain at the earliest availability of some mobile great units (motorize the *Sabratha* Division and also hold in the area of Tripoli the *Trieste* division if, at the time of its landing, the Cyrenaica situation will allow) to deal with possible emergencies to Tunisia.⁽¹⁶⁾

On this line,-Cavallero had already answered Bastico, assuring me that for shipments it was doing everything possible, that July had been substantially complied with, that it was to be hoped that August was equally⁽¹⁷⁾. Had given the required contest of submarine and aircraft for transporting material and approved the staffing and resources recovery from Tripolitania. Then had come to the point, referring to a single July 16 directives:

“The tack of a set back, by this Command already studied and started on the rough Derna-Mechili line is wearing measure with the greatest alacrity, aware that this line must at all costs be basted at the latest at the time at which you pronunciation axis opposing offensive from the East. Such provisions are valid only if fully implemented.

The line now called must be complemented by a solid organization of Ajdabiya, where support for mobile forces intended to thwart possible updates off they were tempted to read opposing forces.

It is evident that provision of such nature would not be complete if it were not materialized the study procedures to be followed in the event that it was necessary to make them enforceable.

This command will like knowing how to respect without delay has been done and what your new program topic”⁽¹⁸⁾.

The issue of lagging positions, just surfaced in the directives of 16 July, passed in the first place and was accompanied to the real order to study a maneuver in retreat. And the contrast between this directive, rather than suggestion, Roatta's recommendation and not to disperse forces on rearward positions until they are available for advanced defense needs acquitted--which, according to the vision of Roatta, postponed practically the measure completely hypothetical future-in order not to fall into the error of weak everywhere, just to chase the illusion of being able to block everything. Aside, however, this observation is certain to detect a surprise with an indication of the line behind Derna-Mechili, with rear support to Ajdabiya, without a word about the position of Gazala, chosen by Comando Superiore and accepted by the OKW, on which the works were under way since mid-May. As for the defensive line goodness Derna-Mechili, Rommel had expressed doubts at the time and also Gambara, who had bothered to take personally a reconnaissance in Eastern *Jebel* and Mechili, was unconvinced. In his opinion, on the Derna-Manuba-*gebelico* Chaulan, the only real obstacle was the ditch of Derna, but due to its poor performance, was prohibitive, so more value is that all land south of the *Jebel* offered the widest possibility of armored maneuver.

Looking through the maps in the Comando Supremo is acquiring the habit of studies concerning operational problems of the theatre of operations in North Africa. In part this is understandable, given that the only the Libyan theater, now, on which you could make feel the influence of the Comando Suprema.

Does not seem free of flaws, since going into detail or translated in invading the field of responsibility of the Comando Superiore N.A. or reduced to a sterile exercise for Office use. But it could also result in operational visions without the necessary support to a direct knowledge of the environment and of the specific situation. The latter had just checked in early August and prompted Cavallero to take rigid position in favor of the Derna-Mechili. An office memo dated 5 August operations summarized the terms of withdrawal by Sollum at *gebel*: a preliminary stage with the affluence of the *Bologna* Inf. Div. on the Derna-Mechili, relief of Sollum front and the withdrawal of services (approximate duration: a dozen days) and a folding phase of Sollum, then follow the breakdown of contact by the *Afrikakorps*; then, starting from the 4th day, delaying action led by armored divisions and the *Trento* Mot. Div. to allow the infantry divisions to take sides on the rear (duration: about ten days). Overall, the transfer of all forces on *gebel el-Mechili* and would take about three weeks, which excluded could be executed under the pressure of the enemy. According to the study, the live Derna-Mechili battle appeared promising in conditions favorable for us: troops sufficient supplies would permit quantitatively, better living conditions. Could even be the case that the *Trieste* Mot. Div. is exuberant for the new backlog. The painting, done in Rome, which had influenced Cavallero to induce him to submit, to the immediate response to the express order Bastico, organize and run the folding operation by August, before, that is, that the opponent to attack ⁽¹⁹⁾: was the admission of the failure of the program of the reinforcements and the acceptance of the operational impotence.

If the first of those concerned to examine such a viewpoint was Rommel, returning from Berlin. Rommel had been welcomed back enthusiastically. His recent further promotion to General of armored troops, ordered by Hitler, had not met with much favor in the neither OKW nor in the OKH but had made even more secure by himself. The 31st he showed up at *Wolfsschanze* in East Prussia, and was able to personally inform Hitler of events by making requests to delete Tobruk before the British offensive and to keep Sollum. Hitler approved. He banned, however, the use of anti-tank grenades

a shaped charge, of which a first quantity had been shipped to Libya, since this is still a secret. With this trusted companion Rommel arrived in Rome and on 6 August von Rintelen accompanied him to the Comando Supremo. Cavallero began saying not to hope for a substantial improvement of maritime transport and repeats as shown in Mussolini and written to Bastico. When Rommel heard of Derna-Mechili refused flatly, arguing the validity of superior position of Gazala. It was more advanced, could be held with two or three divisions and allowed on the right, i.e. to the South, broad way to maneuver tanks counter offensively. "*This is obviously the reason that has affected her choice*-noted in his diary-*Cavallero: tank mentality!*", but it's a highly questionable comment. Maybe the fight *gebelica* position would not have been taken in the area of el-Mechili by armor, as well as had happened during the offensive of O'Connor? And perhaps that the absence of a tank -mentality if not powered! -had not been the source of unhappy equipment of Italian armored divisions and the failure of our initial possibilities in North Africa? However, Rommel not heard reasons and because he was told of the order, already party, to withdraw the troops by Sollum (of Tobruk by the month, added that an withdraw under opposing pressure was not even thinkable.

"I-wrote Cavallero-the need for a second line as a precaution and without giving the impression that I will withdraw. I ask Rommel as he thought to make withdraw when the June 15 it had examined the possible need. Explains that if it was presented as a necessity to cope with, but overall would have been a disaster. Insists on the goodness of the current positions of Sollum and trust that soon will be available to the capture of Tobruk. In my turn I repeat that I don't foresee possible rapid capture of Tobruk, and so the problem of a set is of great importance (...).⁽²⁰⁾.

The difference of opinion was clear, so much so that was carried in front of Mussolini that same morning. The illustration of the situation on the front of Sollum and perspective to keep it even against superior forces, and to take Tobruk to ensure adequate supply terms, is highly confident in tone from Rommel, impressed Mussolini, which favorably dispose that Cavallero and von Rintelen were also

to realize *de visu* the State of things. Before leaving Rome, Cavallero wanted to respond to Keitel. It was a replica of circumstance and courteous, which ended with the announcement of the imminent departure "*to get news direct factual situation in Libya, particularly in Cyrenaica and to realize certain particular problems, including those mentioned above*", that is, rearward positions, capture of Tobruk, constitution of Rommel's *Panzergruppe*⁽²¹⁾.

At Cyrene, the 7th evening, Chief of the General staff had a preliminary conversation with Bastico and Gambara to «explain» the countermand that he himself was carrying: as the Comando Supremo judged the position of Gazala defensive possibilities limited and supportive, this would be equally taken into account in regard to Rommel's opinion and to harmonize our views with those of his ally. Since these had a much more efficient and maneuverable. The discourse was resumed the next morning, at a meeting at which he also von Rintelen, and developed by Cavallero with a somewhat strange thesis: "*the idea of a rear position, West of Tobruk, with employment a static character, replacing the new concept (not from Rommel), a mobile mass of G. U. motorized-armored (Trento and Ariete Divisions, for which Super A.S.I. has already implementing measures in area respectively Ain Gazala and Berta-el Mechtti, to which you will add the Trieste, which will be from Italy between August and early September). This will act as a mobile mass rearward position for his attitude and ability (...) to act in all directions, this group of divisions will obviously, through manoeuvre, the resistance of the great non-mobile advanced units (...)*". We are within the sphere of speciousness not to show to yield to Rommel's ideas. In addition to this point, other determinations were taken.

Firstly, confirmation of the unified command of the Sollum and Tobruk fronts held by Rommel. The capture of Tobruk as soon as you have completed the required media turnout and at least another two divisions (one infantry and one armored), remained the goal to be pursued as a precondition for future offensive revival in Egypt. Would be formed immediately a maneuvering Corps (C.A.M.) with the *Ariete* divisions, *Trento* and *Trieste* Gambara's orders, but also retained the post of Chief of staff of the Comando

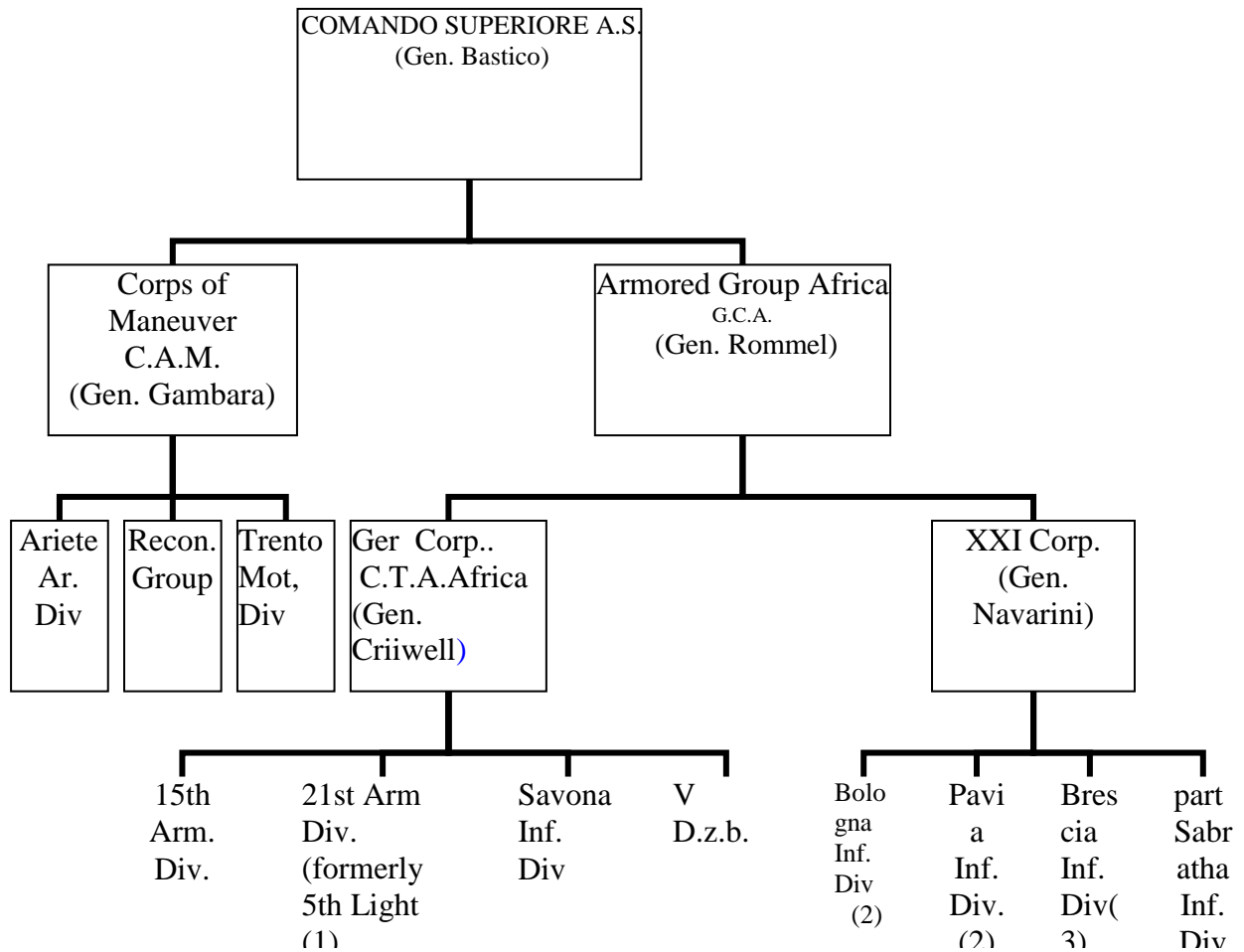
Superiore (!). The Organization of Gazala where the works were already quite advanced, should continue, overseeing its main elements with other forces available and logistics equipment and so the network transmissions. The occupation of the position was to respond to the “*possibility of preventive withdrawal taken in relation to the overall situation and the imminence of an attack clearly prevailing forces (...)*” ⁽²²⁾.

On the evening of July 8 Cavallero departed with Bastico and von Rintelen to Bardia and, later in the afternoon, after visiting the front of Sollum, had a bite with Rommel. Following a further examination of possible governing solutions, the articulation of outlined Cyrene forces suffered some modifications. Ultimately, by 15 August came to depend on Comando Superiore (see the following page map) the *Panzergruppe Afrika* (Gen. Rommel)-formed by the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* and the XXI Corps, with the fronts of Sollum and Tobruk-and the new Corps of maneuver, located between Manuba, Southeast of Derna and Gazala. In particular, the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* (Gen. Ludwig Crüwell) consisted of 15th and 21st *Panzerdivision* (previously 5th light), by *Savona* Inf. Div. and new *Division zur besonderen Verwendung Afrika* (D.z.b.V.) ⁽²³⁾. The XXI Corps (Gen. Enea Navarini), was composed by *Bologna* and *Pavia* divisions-destined to assume the motorized training “type A.S.” (chart on following pages) as the *Trento* -and by the *Brescia* Inf. Div. The maneuvering Corps consisted of a Recon grouping ⁽²⁴⁾, by the *Ariete* and the *Trento* Mot. Div.

As liaison organs, at the Comando Superiore remained just one liaison officer, Lt. Col. Heggenreiner; at the *Panzergruppe Afrika* one Italian liaison Staff held by Gen. Calvi di Bergolo and at the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* a second Italian liaison Staff governed by Col. Lovera di Maria.

From 24 to 28 August took place a journey of Mussolini to Cavallero in Germany to visit, accompanied by Hitler and Keitel, the Russian front. On the 25th Cavallero and Keitel had time and manner of speech of operational problems on the carpet. The German side was not made any secret of the concerns generated by the immensity of the theatre of operations. The situation of vehicles, tires and fuel was deemed serious. For the

TROOPS OPERATING ORGANIZATION CHART IN CYRENAICA



(1) on 27 November will take the name 90th Leichte Division.

(2) The D.f. *Bologna* and *Pavia* were meant to take the structure of Trento Mot. Div.

(3) The D.f. *Brescia* had to preserve the structure of metropolitan divisions.

first the Führer was forced to allow, at the request of von Brauchitsch, sending to the front of the whole production in July; for the latter, supplies from Japan should now flow to the long and dangerous maritime routes; for fuel, consumption is enormous and demonstrated the inadequacy of tank vessels accounted on supplies, including those for Italy.

And immediately placed a pungent observation Keitel but absolutely irrelevant:

MOTORIZED DIVISION ORGANIC Type «Trento».

Division command

Two motorized infantry regiments each with:

- company command;
- two rifle battalions each with:
 - company command;
 - three rifle companies;
 - a mortar platoon from 81;
- one battalion support arms and anti-tank weapons

with:

- company command;
- mortar company from 81;
- company 47/32 guns;
- accompanied by 20 mm. a.a.;

a bersaglieri regiment on:

- company command;
- a motorcycle company;
- two battalions bersaglieri motorized with:
 - company command;
 - two bersaglieri companies;
 - a company guns 47/32;
- one battalion support arms and anti-tank weapons

with:

- company command;
- two mortars from 81 companies;
- a company from 20 mm a.a.;
- a battalion and anti-tank weapons on:

one battalion support arms and anti-tank weapons with

- company command;
- two machine-gun companies;
- a company mortars from 81.;
- a company 47/32 guns;

a motorized artillery regiment with:

- a group from 100/17;
- two groups of 75/27 or 75/18;
- a battery 47/32 guns;
- two 20 mm AA.;

a mixed battalion engineers;

service units.

"On the sending of a second Italian Corps to the Russian front, we thank sincerely from the German side. But to keep in mind that the German command might not give any help in terms of vehicles (...). It would be prudent to use for this second corp vehicles intended for Italian Libya (...).-

In conclusion would be very gratefully received the command of the army in Russia, to evaluate this aspect of the problem (vehicles). "

Cavallero confirmed that Italy was unable to name the Second Corps the 4,600 vehicles given to the first. He also said-but you have every reason to believe that it was a statement based on the certainty that the offer was not accepted-the Second Corps (which had only driven the name) "*should be sent, would be ready to go from the first of September.*" Keitel, then brought the discourse on North Africa. In his opinion, there was no danger of a British offensive, not least because the enemy was engaging in Iran. "*We should have taken Tobruk by the end of September,*" he said and added that it was necessary to employ every possible means to build the position rearward of Gazala. In that regard, the German side were made available to mine, machinery for drilling, anti-tank obstacles, etc. Though the location argument was to be considered as an element of security, "*as a retreat from Sollum and Tobruk would certainly be the worst thing imaginable. The solution of the problem lies in reinforcing Sollum and taking Tobruk. And then our forces would be unassailable even in Libya.*" Cavallero agreed and Keitel went on, clarify unequivocally the OKW's point of view:

"We must then that the command of the two fronts of *Sollum* and Tobruk is gathered in a single hand to maneuver between a front and each other.

About a further advance towards the Suez Canal, immediately after the capture of Tobruk, one can say that they lack the necessary premises, especially for little favorable conditions of communication lines. At every step you do, those lines are getting longer and it gets worse."

Cavallero assured him that this was also the Italian thought. The rest of the conversation was devoted to the question of supplies to Libya; the delicacy of relations with France; the need for Italy to find a way to withdraw the fuel available in *Costanza*, especially with tank-vessels ⁽²⁵⁾; Italian difficulties in relation to raw materials; the garrison to be established for Crete ⁽²⁶⁾.

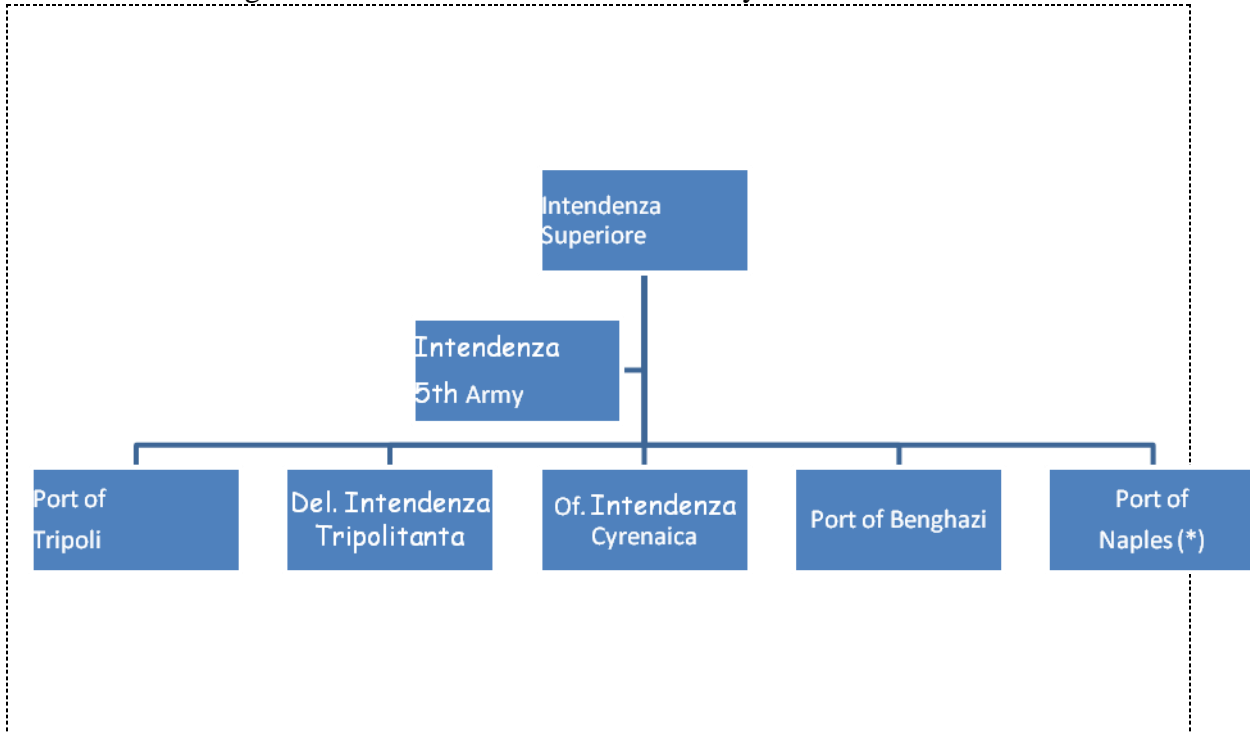
2. THE REORGANIZATION OF THE ITALIAN FORCES.

After the second battle of Sollum began a general restructuring in all sectors, but particularly in the logistics sector. First of all it was necessary to establish a Directorate of administration of the Comando Superiore to reorganize the service on most bases belonging to the needs, and loose weapon depots and offices excerpt, giving storage functions to districts and “Educational Centers and complements” in Libya and offices function excerpt to subsidiary originations in Italy. In this way you could retrieve 4,500 officers and 400 non-commissioned officers and troops.

Was urging a new definition of competencies and territorial responsibility. On 7 July, Libya was divided into four zones, one advanced and three behind. The first included the entire area to the East of the meridian of Gazala and was employed by the Commander of the *Deutsches Afrikakorps*. The other three were put under the jurisdiction of command of the 5th Army (the Tripolitania), the command of the X Corps (Western Cyrenaica) and Libyan Sahara command (the innermost part of Libya). These areas were in turn divided into sectors and sub sectors. The commands of the ports of Tripoli and Benghazi were directly, instead, from Intendant Superiore.

Even the logistical apparatus was cleared up. For the Intendenza Superiore (Benghazi) delegations were of Intendenza for Tripolitania (Tripoli) and Cyrenaica (Derna) and, under the coordination and leadership profile, the Intendenza of the 5th Army, which is yet to be. The delegation for the Tripolitania, characterized by marked static, must provide to receive materials from Italy, starting at Intendenza of the 5th Army and the delegation of Cyrenaica, and preside over the precedence of embarkation and landing in the port of Tripoli and the sorting of units, materials and means. The delegation of Cyrenaica, whose organs were instead equipped with its mobility, had to treat the receipt of supplies direct to it from the top and from the delegation the Intendenza Superiore of Tripolitania and meet the needs of the X Corps and stationed troops in the advanced area. To the Intendenza of the 5th Army was reserved for the management of logistics activities as part of the army and of the Libyan Sahara.

LOGISTICAL organization IN NORTH AFRICA in July 1941



———direct dependency

----a functional dependency

(*) It was seconded by Stewardship Top elements

This organization was not long-lived. Some decisions made by Cavallero during his visit in August had reflected also in territorial and logistics field. The need to recover everything possible from Tripolitania led to a re-examination of Bastico situation in that region and immediately highlight the inconsistency of a measure taken in illusion-for the truth not substantiated by concrete-elements can, little by little, to create an efficient body. In Tripolitania were units of Tunisian border coverage, units in charge of fortified works, few units in coastal and anti-aircraft defense, few Libyans and national wards scattered here and there for territorial reasons.

In addition, the defensive walls of Tripoli, very questionable value, absorbed significant amounts of men, artillery and vehicles. On this structure gradually came to overlap the fort of Tripoli, the command of XX Corps and the army's Command) to (the April 15), all without moving troops and forced to live together. They, therefore, were living in a State of moral discomfort due to functions that are not equal to their rank and absorbed

many officers and personnel in the suborder that would find other use more profitably. General Mario Caracciolo di Farag, Commander of the new army, did not hesitate to speak about it in terms of streamlining and shared the opinion Bastico, proposing to the Comando Supremo dismissal or return of the 5th Army commands and the XX Corps and the Constitution, in their stead, a command of Tripolitania, in charge of the whole organization and territorial defense. This measure had the approval of Cavallero's sampling and some changes to the structure agreed in early July. Starting from August 15, the new command of *Panzergruppe* Mrika had command functions of the Marmarica; the command of the X Corps command of Cyrenaica ones with the fort of Benghazi and Derna areas, Barce and Ajdabiya; the command of Tripolitania was dissolved commands of the 5th Army and of XX Corps and had jurisdiction over the fort in Tripoli and the Tunisian frontier garrisons and Libyan Sahara. Logistic point of view, the delegation of the Intendenza of Tripoli was transformed into the Intendenza of Tripolitania, tasked to receive supplies from the Mainland and their sorting between the Intendenza and other entities.

The anti-aircraft defense was another big problem, especially for the ports of Tripoli and Benghazi, whose efficiency conditions left much to be desired. At the end of June the location of anti-aircraft batteries was as follows:

Location	battery (mobile or fixed)							
	102/35	88/56	77/28	76/45	76/40	76/30	75/40	75/27
Tripoli	3	3+5*	4	2	4	1	-	-
Buerat	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
Ras Taiunes	1	-	-	-	-	1/2	-	-
Benghazi	1	3*	-	-	11	-	6	-
Derna	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	2
Marsa el Brega	-	-	-	-	-	1/2	-	-
Total	5	11	4	2	17	2	6	2
* For large units and then to replace with battery position.								

Altogether it was 190 cannons of various caliber. Gen. Manca had given to do with good results, but

Obviously he could not remedy the unavailability of parts, taking into account those that have become unserviceable because worn out. Began to give a unitary organization anti-aircraft and coastal defenses of Tripolitania, forming a coast artillery Command (CA) and headquartered in Tripoli, from which depended on: CA grouping of Tripolitania on three groups of 88; the 300 A/A groupings. and four coastal mixed groups; the coastal group of Tripolitania.

The latter included:

- the fort of Tripoli: a group of 77/28, two from 149/35 and two mixed groups;
- the area of Homs: The/26 or artillery and a battery from 75/27 by position;
- the area of Zliten: a mixed group;
- the Misurata: a group of 77/28 and a 75/27 by position;
- the Buerat sector: a 102/35 and from 75/27 by position;
- the Sine: two 75/27 by position;
- the area of Marsa el Auegia: a section from 76/40 of R. Marina;
- the Zavia area: a group of 77/28;
- the area of Zuwara: a group of 77/28;

In Cyrenaica there were other three units: the 2nd regiment A/A artillery with a group from 75/27, two from 75/50 and one 88/56; a 20 mm AA grouping with two groups of position and a motorized group; a coastal grouping on a German 155 group and a group from Italian 149/35.

As for the anti-aircraft material, in July it was required a substantial quantity: 130 projectors, of which at least a third with wave and Parallax Correctors; 20 mm sections 193 and 75 batteries from 75, 88 and 90. Unfortunately the limited availability at home did not meet even a fourth of therefore needs Cavallero dispose sending by September-October of 17 projectors of 120 and 13 aero phones, of 47 sections 20 and 8 battery position. When it had been possible to be shipped another 18 projectors of 120 and a dozen batteries.

The Germany had not disinterested of the matter. Since 3 May von Rintelen had communicated to the Comando Supremo

the OKW's desire to "*know the number and types of anti-aircraft batteries exist in Libya to decide if it is the case of strengthening them*". After sending five batteries of 75 for coastal defense, Goering decided to send two groups, each with three batteries of 88 and two 20 batteries of course regardless of the anti-aircraft units destined for the *Afrikakorps*. The first group was to be transferred in mid-October and the second in the next month. The fact is that during the summer the dispatches from Cyrene followed. As soon you could get, Bastico told the Supreme Command:

“Enemy air raids on Tripoli and Benghazi took an increasingly intense, causing significant property damage and serious repercussions on the population,

The anti-aircraft defense is not sufficient to prevent the offense; It should integrate with the use of night fighter, because it does not exist in N, A, the means to organize the particular service, please this interesting Superaereo Command for the measures it deems appropriate”
(27).

The telegram had undergone a replica by Pricolo: both Tripoli and Benghazi were assigned sections of night hunting and at the moment the most inconvenience felt was insufficient number of projectors, designed to find and illuminate enemy aircraft to allow the hunt to spot them and attack them. Of course, the allocation of competence was in the army. A month later, the General staff of the R. Aeronautica returned on this topic to discuss how the night air defense service. In other words, existed on uncertainties or differences of opinions that were inevitable reflected in practical field. From the moment the projectors included in each sector of night fighter captured and retained in the beam of light some fighter aircraft, the opponent would have to intervene, with freedom of action, up to the limit of the normal barrage of anti-aircraft batteries. However the Comando Superior had placed that lit the enemy plane, was AA artillery to have freedom of action, even beyond the regular line of the barrage. As a result, the field of activity of the hunt was again dismissed from the lens and located beyond the reach of artillery and, therefore, of headlamps. However, this created other problems, because the greater embarrassment to the Nightstalker stemmed from the difficulties of spotting the enemy plane and not lose sight of during the Chase. Furthermore, there was a group in Benghazi of *Flak* 88

directly employed by the *Fliegerführer Afrika*, that the shooting sound, according to their mode of action. Ultimately, the Comando Supremo was established, following examination by a Joint Committee of experts, the criteria that should govern the use of night fighter in collaboration with A/A. artillery, in relation to the development of auxiliary means.

In November, Pricolo will inspection in Libya and will return on the issue with the Comando Supremo. Based on interviews with the Superior artillery Command, agreed with the local *Flak* Command, will kick in, a series of experiments at Benghazi and Tripoli ⁽²⁸⁾. Leaves are somewhat puzzled by the fact that, a year or more after the entry into the war, was still to be determined the course of action to take for the air defense of the territory, while recalling that night hunting, first non-existent, was organized after the start of hostilities. The most conspicuous deficiencies still resided in bad definition of responsibility (often divided between army, air force, Navy and Militia); in the poor organization of the transmissions, and reporting sightings, but mostly in the total absence of radiolocation systems that allow the timely intervention of air defense and ground.

Particular attention had been paid to the need to eliminate, or at least mitigate, the too many negative aspects of the preparation of personnel and the lack of initial amalgam. To accommodate, therefore, departments under the Constitution or reconstitution and complements in influx from Italy were implanted education centers of Barce (for infantry and the engineers) and el-Abiar (for artillery) and a “artillery instruction Center N.A.”, to directly under the artillery Comando Superiore to treat training material from 75/27, 100/17, 105/28 and 149/13; anti-tank pieces from 47/32 and to those from 20 anti-aircraft, in addition to specialized schools for shooting, broadcasting and tractor drivers. For armored personnel carriers had been arranged a «tank» Centre with repair shops for light tanks at Fort Mara (West of Derna), for medium tanks in Derna and for small and medium repairs light tanks and attendance to the workshops of medium tanks battalions to Gazala.

Engineering specialists were sent to technical specialization schools and Telegrapher and become unemployed in classes to Tripoli, where they were also held courses for vehicle drivers and

motorcyclists. Mechanics, electricians, engineers, water and photo-electricity were prepared at the workshops of Tripoli, Benghazi and Manuba.

As you can imagine, this is a considerable effort, he had to overcome as they did, or hurt, the motherland. Now, for certain activities you could find it almost inevitable that a practical course was held in the desert, but atypical for most there is no doubt that training could be accomplished in Italy. The result was that the remedy-rightly adopted by Comando Superiore presented the major drawback of subtract qualified instructor staff-officers, non-commissioned officers and specialists-to units and prevented the immediate use of the new arrivals.

For the field artillery was given a thorough tune-up but somewhat slow, forcibly, among other things, tending to transfer in Cyrenaica divisional parts remained behind. There were, however, significant differences of opinion between German concepts and those of Gen. Manca on the use of artillery. For Rommel, at fire hydrants available had to be attributed strong anti-tank function; in other words, you should not hesitate to use with single pointing, shooting of course where just the type of material and the type and weight of the projectile allowed. According to this view became secondary batteries then were put in perfect order before going online. "*If the British attack and we cannot effectively respond, what if it makes Gen. Manca of batteries that are putting into order in Tripoli?*" remarked Lt. Col. Heggrenreiner to Gambara on 28 July. It is obvious that each had its pros and cons. In mid-August the situation of field artillery non-divisional, not dependent on the Comando Superiore artillery was as follows:

- 16th grouping Corps artillery with three groups from 105/28, assigned in the *Deutsches Afrikakorps*.

- 24th grouping Corps artillery with two groups from 105/28 and one from 100/17, assigned in the *Pavia* Inf. Div;

- 5th artillery corps with compartment four groups from 149/35 in Tripoli;

- 340th grouping border guard artillery with four groups of 77/28, assigned to reinforce the *Trento* Mot. Div.;

-1st quick artillery regiment with two groups of 75/27, assigned to the *Brercia* Inf.Div;

-2nd quick artillery regiment with a 100/17 group and two groups from 75/27, assigned to the *Deutsches Afrikakorps*.

-3rd quick artillery regiment with a 100/17 group and two groups from 75/27, assigned to the *Pavta* Inf. Div.

With regard to the Divisional artillery, was there to detect a significant mixed up with units due to organic divisions, incompleteness of the straggling or needs of military nature. To this was added the restructuring of large units. As a result, in mid-September the army chiefs of staff will have an overall rearrangement through equalization payments and the influx movements of other groups from Italy on the basis of new organic, briefly summarized here:

regiments	Organic of record	Organic arrived at	Notes
1 st Quick Art.	two groups of 75/27 a group from 100/17	two groups of 75/27 two groups of 100/17	
2 nd Quick Art.	two groups of 75/27 a group from 100/27	three groups of 75/27	
3 rd Quick Art.	two groups of 75/27	three groups of 75/27	
132nd Art. <i>Ariete</i>	two groups of 75/27	two groups from 75/18 a group from 105/18	(*) (*)
12th Art <i>Savona</i>	One group from 75/27 a group from 100/71	two groups of 75/27 two groups of 100/17	(**)
26th Art <i>Pavia</i>	One Group from 75/27 a group from 100/17	two groups of 75/27 two groups of 100/17	(**)
46th Art. <i>Trento</i>	Two groups of 75/27 a group from 100/17	two groups of 75/27 two groups of 100/17	(**)
205th Art <i>Bologna</i>	two groups of 75/27 a group from 100/17	two groups of 75/27 two groups of 100/17	(**)
(*) receivable from Italy (**) one receivable from Italy.			

As you can see, the scarcity of artillery was such that, having to fend off the Divisional resources insufficiency, you couldn't think certain of a maneuver of fire. The only usable units was the 5th Corps artillery with old 149/35. Incidentally, the limited acquisition of raw materials had already forced to suspend the second program of construction of artillery (February 1941) and even to reduce the first program (June 1941). Will be finalized and constituted in the units by the end of 1941 only 48 cannons 149/40 and 16 howitzers 210/22.

Even the precarious system of broadcasting in Northern Africa from once you feel its weight negative. For resolving the problem Gen. Luigi Grosso, Commander of engineers, and Gen. Erich Fellgiebel, Commander of German transmissions had met on June 15, coming to define the arrangements for the installation of a secure telephone and teletype network from Tripoli to Tobruk. It was spread a double line to multiple frequencies with terminals at Tripoli and Tobruk (*Afriakorps*) and intermediate places in Misurata, Sirte, el Agheila, Agedabia, Benghazi, Derna, Cyrene. The German command would provide technicians, materials for multiple frequencies, apparatus and personnel. The Comando Superiore should provide for the piling, insulation materials, and labor. Initially it was necessary to realize the telephone section Tobruk-Derna-Cyrene-Benghazi. In addition to this important measure, on 7 July an Inspectorate was established links, dependent on the Chief of staff of the Comando Superiore for a centralized control of broadcasts.

Among all units stationed in Libya one was particularly held an eye: the only Italian armored Division. Now the *Ariete* had to be completely put back in shape. After operation *Battleaxe* was withdrawn to Berta, where began his recovery, recovering the grouping Montemurro and Santamaria. Gen. Baldassarre asked immediately to abandon light tanks and use the personnel on medium tanks, which would have permitted the shipment from Italy material only, but the proposal was not accepted by the personnel of the army. From the experiences made at home, was in fact that the transition of pilots from light tanks to medium tanks took about two months, during which the tanks themselves were developed, to make preferably not far from workshops and warehouses of the manufacturers. In these two months, therefore, the *Ariete* would not

could it be the existing light units nor the new medium and anyway would arrive from Italy the Radioman and the serving of the piece. On balance, to strengthen the Division soon could not only complete by August the medium tank Regiment, but only in September a second medium tank regiment after the influx of the *Trieste*. The light tank regiment would be used for what it could do, using the personnel as complements, or using special tasks units or motorized divisions. Cavallero blocked immediately the thing. He did not want a "heavy" Armored Division and claimed to be preferable that the *Ariete* was made up of only one tank Regiment, "*so lighter, more maneuverable, as if it were a brigade*." So organic tables issued in late August foresaw a great unit the 8th bersaglieri, the 132nd tank Regiment M 13 and 132nd artillery. The 32nd tank Regiment, three battalions of light tanks, remained by the time reinforcements to *Ariete* (organic, see the following page).

Of course the review order, the problem is not solved in the long run of the tanks. For some time there were uncertainties and doubts in this regard. The light tanks were miserably failed, but the usefulness of a light tank, best, there was. The M 13 tanks had submitted a series of glitches still to delete. For one thing, the Fiat and Ansaldo were commissioned to investigate the replacement of *diesel* engine with a petrol engine with higher output power. In time they were underway with measures to solve the other downsides, though he would not come to a complete solution prior to 1942. In early June, the Technical Director of Fiat, Eng. Valletta, had presented to Cavallero, a panorama of the current situation, ongoing studies and perspectives for the future. In essence, in due time the Italy could count on four types of tanks ⁽²⁹⁾:

6 L tank (from 6.8 tons approx.): in the course of production at the Spa with a maximum rate of about 65 monthly units, to be achieved in August 1941;

M 13 tank (from 15 around tons), with increased engine: in production for the last 700 units of the order at the Spa and Ansaldo, with a rate of about 10 monthly units;

Tank of 18 tons. He was playing the Pzkw III. Its production could replace one of the substitute just after the M 13 provision for the production;

ORGANIC ARMORED DIVISION “ <i>Ariete</i> ”	
Division command	
8 th bersaglieri regiment with:	
company command;	
motorcycle company;	
V bersaglieri battalion motorized with:	
company command;	
two companies bersaglieri;	
company 47/32 guns A/T.	
XII bersaglieri battalion motorized with same organization;	
III accompanying weapons Battalion with:	
company command;	
machine-gun company;	
company from 20 mm;	
mortar company from 81.	
132 nd infantry tank regiment with:	
company command;	
VII battalion M 13;	
VIII battalion M 13;	
IX battalion M 13.	
anti-tank battalion with:	
Unit command;	
two companies 47/32 guns A/T.	
132 nd artillery regiment with:	
two groups of 75/27 T.M. (later 75/18 smv);	
a group of 105/28 (to be sent by Italy);	
a mixed group with:	
two batteries from 90/53; (to be sent by Italy)	
a 20 mm battery. (to be sent by Italy)	
mixed engineer battalion (almost everything to be sent from Italy);	
service units.	

tank from 25 tons, with 75 mm gun was going to set up a sample.

Unfortunately, the "proper time" will not do the tank from 18 tons, nor for that from 25. At the end of August the situation of efficient tanks in Cyrenaica was as follows: X Corps 15 tank L3; *Brescia* Inf. Div. 15 tank L 3; *Pavia* Inf. Div. 25 tank L3; *Bologna* Inf. Div. 14 tank L3; *Savona* Inf. Div. 15 tank L 3; *Ariete* Arm. Div. 64 tank 3 L and 131 tank.M13. Total: 148 light tanks and 131 medium⁽³⁰⁾.

In this context, we should not forget Tobruk. The siege of the fort was heavy and or wear out noticeably the large units it engaged: the *Brescia*, the 15th rifle Brigade, the *Pavia* and *Trento* (replaced in the last ten days of August by the *Bologna*). The troops were nailed in tight holes and trenches dug in the sand, immobilized for hours under the threat of a fire intermittently, but always ready to seize a movement of artillery and automatic weapons of the besieged. Premises were, consequently, dysentery, intestinal infections, skin diseases, decreased physical endurance and nervous. The life, within obvious limits, when blows the *ghibli*: the enemy has found solace in the shelters and the taking of besieging sandstorm for some small personal operation. But it was at night that it became possible to take breath. Tremendous warmth disappeared, the only hot meal of the day arrived and were deployed, water supplies, ammunition, etc. refresh first-line facilities; everything could be valid counterweight to the long hours of the day had it not been replaced the worst danger: patrol activity. On both sides, but especially by the enemy, entering in action combat patrols aimed at the capture of prisoners, to the destruction of some advanced workstation or disabling strokes of minefield. In this the Australians excelled for suitability and individual training and also because it was easier to penetrate in the meshes of the besieged not besieging. Are known their clothing and their armament particularly suitable for such acts, as well as the rapid, efficient violence with which they carried out the task. If the heat during the day and the forced inactivity exhaust physicist, at night the nightmare of Australian patrols kept. constantly taut nerves. It must be said, that it lacked in Italian file-in general-the preparation of paintings. During the night it was almost normal for this or that automatic weapon opened

fire blindly, having the imagination suggested approaching in dark shadows, soon imitated by an entire stretch of the front. And it was less frequently the case with units, commanders strongly in hand, looking the most absolute silence in order to better see the approach of any enemy patrols and which comply with the strict discipline of the fire.

In such an environment of war, combatants on both sides had found a tacit agreement, as frequently happens in war of position: at dusk and was suspended for two hours the fire and men could go out without any danger from holes where they were. Spend two hours the Germans signaled the end of 'truce' with a barrage of tracer shot into the air. And there was also another custom: when a man was hit, was raised a flag of the Red Cross and soon the fire stopped at that section, so that the cot could intervene to the evacuation of the wounded. The only action that remains from the usual routine took place after nightfall on August 3. The enemy made a surprise attack on the Fort of Ras el-Medauar, at the junction between the areas of *Brescia* and of the 15th rifle Brigade. At first managed to seize Fort S 7, manned by the Germans. The *Brescia* promptly reinforced their right flank position, preventing the widening of the gap and the evening of the same day a German tactical retook the small fort complex.

While, albeit haltingly, was an improvement of the condition of large ground units, the R. Aeronautica, struggling with the same problem, was succeeded in May to build infrastructure capable of accommodating air units already waiting for transfer. Just at the end of the month Gen. Aimone-Cat had gone to Rome agreeing with Pricolo kicker program based on whether to send overseas only strictly required units to avoid excessive crowding of aircraft on tricky courses, stockpiles and insufficient logistics facilities. It was, of course, the need to maintain the efficiency of flight units with timely replenishments, greatly increase the supply of engines and keep ready in homeland to change units of those worn out in Africa. At the same time, not to make too rigid principle, and therefore incompatible with moments of crisis operations, was recognized the convenience of sending airport parts

you can cope with any sudden need for arming and new fields.

On 10 July the 5th Ai Fleet had a total of 275 aircraft, of which 181 efficient. For the August 1 was expected to reach the 300 aircraft:

8 th Bomber stormo.	36 Aircraft	Br. 20
13th Bomber stormo	54 »	Br. 20 & S.79
97 th dive-bombers Group	27 »	Ju. 87
a torpedo Squadron	7 »	S. 79
3 rd and 160 th fighter group	84 »	Cr.42
12 th , 20 th & 155th fighter group	108 »	G. 50
153 rd fighter group	36 »	Mc. 200
two fighter sections.	4 »	CR. 42
two squadrons strategic. recon.	14 »	S. 79

“These aerial forces entities - observed Pricolo - is far from negligible, even if linked to British air forces counter opposed in Egypt” ⁽³¹⁾, naming the 150 units established in early July from photographic reconnaissance on the fields of Western Egypt. *“As a result of the above, I believe that it is to be expected, for the moment, a further increase of units of 5th Air Fleet”* because, he explained, although he wanted would not have known where to draw between peninsular units, whereas those in the untouchables Aegean, in Sicily and Sardinia. For fighters, in fact, the 2nd stormo, returned to Piedmont from Libya at the end of December 1940, it had just completed training on the new Mc 200, also was intended to defend Northwestern Italy and, in the near future, to interchange other worn out groups in Africa. The 1st stormo (with Mc 200), he returned to Friuli after one year of use in Sicily, was to begin its transformation on Re 2001 aircraft. The 52nd stormo (Mc 200) was virtually all committed to the defense of Rome and Naples. The 22nd gruppo was in preparation for the Russian front; the 150th gruppo was in Albania-Greece; the 9th was becoming on Mc 202 aircraft and then would go in Sicily. Infme, two squadrons of Mc 200 were in Puglia for the defense of Taranto and Brindisi.

For the bombardment, always apart from the mentioned sectors more involved operationally, the situation appeared: transitional five stormi were turning on a new type of aircraft; four

were in, recovery phase of efficiency because worn out; one, almost completely devoid of war type equipment, was completing the line.

Truth be told, the Comando Superiore N.A.-which was sent a copy of the letter of Pricolo - showed not satisfied neither intensification, remained partly not implemented, nor the assessment made by Superaereo. For the first appearance, reinforcements arrived and made substitutions would have benefited the Tripolitania and Cyrenaica remained more or less at the current level; it was enough to consider that in Tripolitania immobilized, alone, half of all the fighters. At the conclusion of the additional requirements indicated, Bastico-who had just taken the lead-made some remarks:

“1st -numerical data are provided by the 5th Air Fleet *fortnightly*. It is therefore obvious that for efficient 'aircraft' means those in every part and *fit for flight*; but they still deducted that percentage of *daily* equipment inefficient for small ones.

2nd -this command has no objection to the concept materialized from Superaereo with the command of the 5th Air Fleet, keep only *essential* units in Libya and to keep ready in homeland units for the turnover.

Notes, moreover, that the limit of necessity related to the requirements of normal and peaceful periods activities and not-as it seems more appropriate-to periods of intense operational activity.

The proposals formulated by this command do not reach the certain limit that would be suggested by the latter criterion; just consider the first more width.

We also consider that keeping the *essential* limit is absolute necessity that the units are kept permanently in efficiency with timely replacements so that flying lines are always the full organic. Now there are entire groppi with only 4-7-8 efficient appliances.

3rd -does not seem possible to make a comparison with the opposing air forces. Superaereo numeric data refer only to advanced airports of the enemy, while our consider all Libya.

4th -the enemy has aircraft carriers that we did not; and if the base of Malta is countered by the Motherland, the Libya brings the result of neutralization certainly intense but not enough.

Our defensive attitude, numerous vital objectives to defend and protect one interspersing also obliges the means from the Tunisian front to Sollum.

5th to our line up is all very backward and no possibility of being carried out at the time of need because our fields are distributed to cordon along the coast. The most advanced is at Gazala (170 miles from the East); Gambut is only used as a back-up airport.

The opponent has advanced fields, well equipped and armed, and suitably

deployed; the shift of its air forces from backwater (Alexandria-Cairo-Suez) to advanced zone is only a matter of a few hours.

It is essential that the deployment of our armed airports and is also reviewed with the criterion of do gravitate towards the Cyrenaica - Egyptian border (...).

It is the opinion of this command that the problem of strengthening Libya's aviation cannot be resolved with the measures indicated by Superaereo in the report, but that it should instead be urgently reviewed and resolved according to the proposed minimum requirements this sheet"⁽³²⁾.

Despite the strict letter of Bastico the matter dragged on for a long time. He was on the carpet when visiting Cavallero in Cyrene. If you deal in November Pricolo, when in turn will go to Libya. It was not resolved, it could be said, because for every particular which provide an impediment or a mishap more or less justified. But this was actually something else. Between terrestrial Commands and aeronautical Commands (not to mention the R. Marina) there were misunderstandings and divergences of views that caused misunderstanding, interference and susceptibility: the ideal atmosphere to create an unbridgeable gap between opposing mentality, although it is thought to have covered the subject. On 7 May, in fact, Mussolini had enacted provisions about dependencies and aviation use of overseas lands, which was attributed to the superior Commander and command the use of naval and air forces, as terrestrial ones. Very not ended because the total responsibility for this state of affairs was to be ascribed to the structure of the Comando Supremo and the slow conversion of the main military leaders at a joint conception of war and operations.

If Comando Superiore and control between 5th Air Fleet were sometimes not relationships of mutual satisfaction, even less will contemporaneously on between Italians and Germans. To be well informed regarding the progress of aviation and Air-Ground cooperation with German commands, Bastico had asked immediately to Aimone-Cat precise information. These represented the inconveniences of more strong relief⁽³³⁾ but mainly argued that the agreements signed in Rome, heads for the use of the two air forces in the Central-Eastern Mediterranean⁽³⁴⁾, not effectively solved the problems of traffic safety between Italy and Libya and air cooperation in the two fields of Tobruk and Sollum.

"In the opinion of the Commander of the 5th Air Fleet, fully shared by me, it would therefore be necessary to revise these agreements-

Bastico wrote the Comando Supremo -in order to establish an aviation command unit, or at the very least, if this is not possible, in the alternative, for a particular use that address giving the maximum guarantees of timely and rational use of Allied aircraft, in relation to their combat and technical characteristics, would eliminate the continuing uncertainties and the inevitable conflicts that arise in daily practice of aeronautical use, especially in the form of requests, sometimes just appropriate or even unacceptable or impossibly small, by Allied command of the army and the air force.⁽³⁵⁾

Pricolo, asked by Cavallero, responded by confirming the validity of the agreements, although some senior appearance faulty or incomplete. He recognized that a single Command would have gotten a higher yield, but “wanting *in Africa come to the solution of the single Command aviation cooperation in strategic and tactical terrestrial field, this command could not be German, in analogy to what occurs for my terrestrial advanced deployment*”, which was unacceptable. Ultimately, it seemed preferable to act according to the principle of collaboration⁽³⁶⁾. Maybe you could find a more effective solution; However, that unfortunately the results were not those expected was obvious.

3. THE PROBLEM OF MARITIME TRAFFIC BETWEEN ITALY AND LIBYA.

The question of supplies to Libya was available tonnage, routes, potential for discharge of arrival ports, possibility of utilization of Tunisian ports, aerial and naval escorts for the convoys, enemy aerial offenses, surface and submarine; had many aspects, in short. But it all revolved around a central point, at the beginning of the war underestimated by Italians, Germans and English: Malta⁽³⁷⁾.

The main task of the X *Fliegerkorps* had been defined by Hitler with the directive no. 22 of January 11: attack the British maritime communications in the Mediterranean. The corp was also used in support of the *Deutsches Afrikakorps*, *Fliegerführer Afrika*, through the protection of transport by sea of German troops and particularly in neutralizing Malta. The rumors of these commitments had not only led to big losses, despite the increase in manpower, but also an offensive slowdown on Malta. To give an idea of the situation in which had come to be the X *Fliegerkorps* in mid

April, looks very significant a call between Maj. Gen. Gruno Air Corps command, and Gen. Otto H. von Waldau of the command in Chief of air force (*Oberbefehlshaber der Luftwaffe* = Ob.d.L.):

“By January we lost around ninety-five aircraft: thirty of them with full crew. The situation of the aircraft is so catastrophic that those still operating are so small in number to prevent us from carrying out convoy escorts. The crews of the *Junker* are demoralized. These losses have had a disastrous effect on men, who, having to make simply immense journeys no longer have confidence in their work (...). We no longer know what to do. It is necessary as a matter of urgency and to bear in mind that we now have to cover immense distances ⁽³⁸⁾.

Intense actions on April 29 and 30 against British warships based in Malta, including the Cruiser *Gloucester*, led Gen. Geissler to call the 30th same to Ob.d.L. declaring a «madness» attacking Malta naval objectives until you have softened the defenses of the island with high-altitude bombing and grazing flight, and commenting that if the Italian Navy mined the waters of *Grand Harbour*, the British would continue to receive reinforcements ⁽³⁹⁾.

On 25 April, meanwhile, Hitler had issued the directive no. 28 on the conquest of Crete. Consequently, although a couple of weeks before Rommel had requested the transfer of X *Fliegerkorps* to Cyrenaica, this was moved to Greece. The Air Corps had not obtained spectacular results against Malta-like, from the Italian side, someone had imagined and hoped-but before January 19, 1941 aeronautics of Sicily had certainly done better and after 22 May-when German units began leaving for Greece-the pressure on Malta eased immediately. Since then, in fact, control of the island was entrusted to the R. Aeronautica.

The end of the war in Balcania had, in fact, prompted the Comando Supremo to consider once again the problem of Malta to resolve the maritime transport between Mainland and Libya. On May 5 Guzzoni, recognized the gradual weakening of the effectiveness of air strikes on the island and taken note of the failure of the negotiations for the use of the ports of Tunisia, had supported the need to try the occupation of Malta, unless you give up any idea of further offensives in Northern Africa. It was then that arose the serious determination to go to

bottom of the nagging problem, despite the greatest difficulty. Two days after he formally placed the topic on the table: "(...) *In the current situation it would be supremely useful employment of Malta. The Staffs in address [army, Navy and air force] study again our operational possibilities and me to start as soon as possible.*" Supermarina resumed the project compiled the previous year ("Monograph Sm 71 S", of 18.6.1940) and updated, taking into account the variations relating of the island's defenses and the situation in the Mediterranean. This review led to Adm. Riccardi to observe, in a note dated May 9 that the experience of nearly a year of war had unfortunately demonstrated how most of the assumptions upon which it was wrong: they were parties in particular the prior air demolish action and the blockade of the island, to get with insidious means, were showing, at least so far, hesitant.

An initial response to the unofficial Supreme command was constituted by memorandum No. 103. Recalling the conclusions of the previous study-that Malta did not represent a decisive goal and therefore was simply continuing to make it impossible to stay in Valletta of important naval forces, to catch the movement of those few existing ships and to prevent the supplies by air strikes and ambushes of submarine-Radwan admitted:

"1. (...) Eleven months of wartime experience showed the excessive optimism of these conclusions, not so much with regard to the magnitude of the forces that England has managed to stay active, but occasionally against the threat from these forces exercised against our communications with Libya and Malta's capacity to act as a point of support for the transfer of air forces, naval forces and to steamers from one to the other Mediterranean basin.

And indeed, as they revealed more important war in North Africa, the British strengthened the defenses of the island, so that:

a) frequent bombing of our air army and the 10th C.A.T. have met increasing difficulties obtaining destructive effects that seems fair to judge decreasing;

b) Navy insidious means didn't get the purpose to isolate Malta (...);

c)

d) high performance torpedo aircraft war and magnetic mines have much increased the risks of the transverse between Sicily and Libya (...) for the mere probability that in Malta there is even one squadron of aircraft capable of carrying torpedoes or magnetic mines, without saying the bombers;

and When the British) are determined to keep permanently in Malta a DD., which just arrived there we had in a night raid

destroyed an entire convoy with 3 DDs escorting it, we were forced to put in escort service in turn the divisions of cruisers ⁽⁴⁰⁾;

2. Results from the above that the taking of Malta represents an improvement of situation and losses that it would cost us in a day would save us from those more which we encounter in Libya for transport and that, based on hard experience, could in the long run become worrisome, for the impossibility of quick replacement of lost ships.

Nobody any more in the Navy is therefore interested in undertaking cutting off the Malta from the English (...)"

Given the magnitude of the defenses and the presence of some 15,000 men, they estimated need an invasion force of 35,000-40,000 men with special landing craft and parachute units, hundreds of aircraft of bombing and fighters as well as the naval fleet. The conclusion was almost daunting:

"7. However consider the operation, will appear all the difficulties in the technical field staff and Executive.

In any case it would not run before the end of the year to meet the needs of means and training of men.

Someone did ask whether we should deal with the difficult problem, taking particularly into account the time required to have good chance of resolving it in our favor ⁽⁴¹⁾.

On May 25 Riccardi addressed to Comando Supremo, another reminder to resume and develop some points, accentuating the negative attitude of the former. Moving from theory to practice, after recalling that Malta's defense had not been dismantled nor weakened substantially by German air offensive had highlighted the lack of motorized rafts and its silent engines needed to transport the first echelon. For the rest, while using thirty motor sailboats and not ready used for Jonie Islands landing actions and other defensive breakwaters for ports, you could get just half of the calculated demand. Ultimately, before the end of the year so he could kick off the operation, provided of course that you placed the hand without delay to their preparations.

So the project was nearly shelved by again. There remained, however, the problem of ensuring traffic with North Africa and Supermarina, although aware do not suggest a viable solution, had to go back to asking that the island was "neutralized" by aviation. If in 1940 that had failed, less than ever before could succeed in the summer of 1941. Because the island had become a very valuable airbase ⁽⁴²⁾ and naval and

aircraft shortages prevented strike against it in mass raids, had begun to resort more and more frequently at night actions, in truth with little exciting results because of defensive features and radars system used by the opponent, whose coordination allowed the full cooperation of a night fighter Air Group⁽⁴³⁾ under the headlights under the radar. In essence, the neutralization of air was more an aspiration than a real possibility.

Moreover, there was no agreement on the best way to operate. The Comando Supremo and Supermarina just felt “*prevent enemy air activity while navigating of our convoys and thus [the actions] must be carried out only during the period when the convoy is in the danger zone and with character of great intensity and duration.*” The R. Aeronautica, on the other hand, argued that the proposed system would come to mean in the usual actions of disorder that proved so poorly effective; that night air operations to Magill couldn't always coincide with the passage of convoys because favorable weather conditions subject to; that, finally, forays into force could not be prolonged for a whole night or day. The overall picture was so little consoling that, when Adm. Raeder asked about possibility of an enterprise for the conquest of Malta, Riccardi said (July 15) that, according to the updated study of the problem, similar initiative could not be addressed with naval aircraft and that Italy had.

The issue of Malta and Tunis was too important because the same Rommel decided to not apply directly to OKW. In a July 19 report he wrote:

“I believe that Malta's problem to be solved immediately, as it was for Crete. In any case it is necessary, for supplies through the channel of Sicily, that the convoys are absolutely undisturbed. The Italian Navy has intensified in recent months, the stock system, but you should increase the potential escort. I notice that (...) the action for Tunis and Bisena is an indispensable condition for the success of the *Afrikorps's* advance toward the Nile Valley. The whole situation is fluid Africa North and untrustworthy. My information and Canaris agree with those of Italians in estimating a possible gesture of dissent on the part of French North Africa, which would have huge negative impact on the strategic situation in the Mediterranean (...).

I therefore suggest so therefore to the OKW to consider for the next offensive (which, I repeat, will not be before *the fall*) a double maneuver, eastwards and westwards, with the *occupation of Tunis* and Bizerte and, where appropriate, *of Algeria (...)*”.

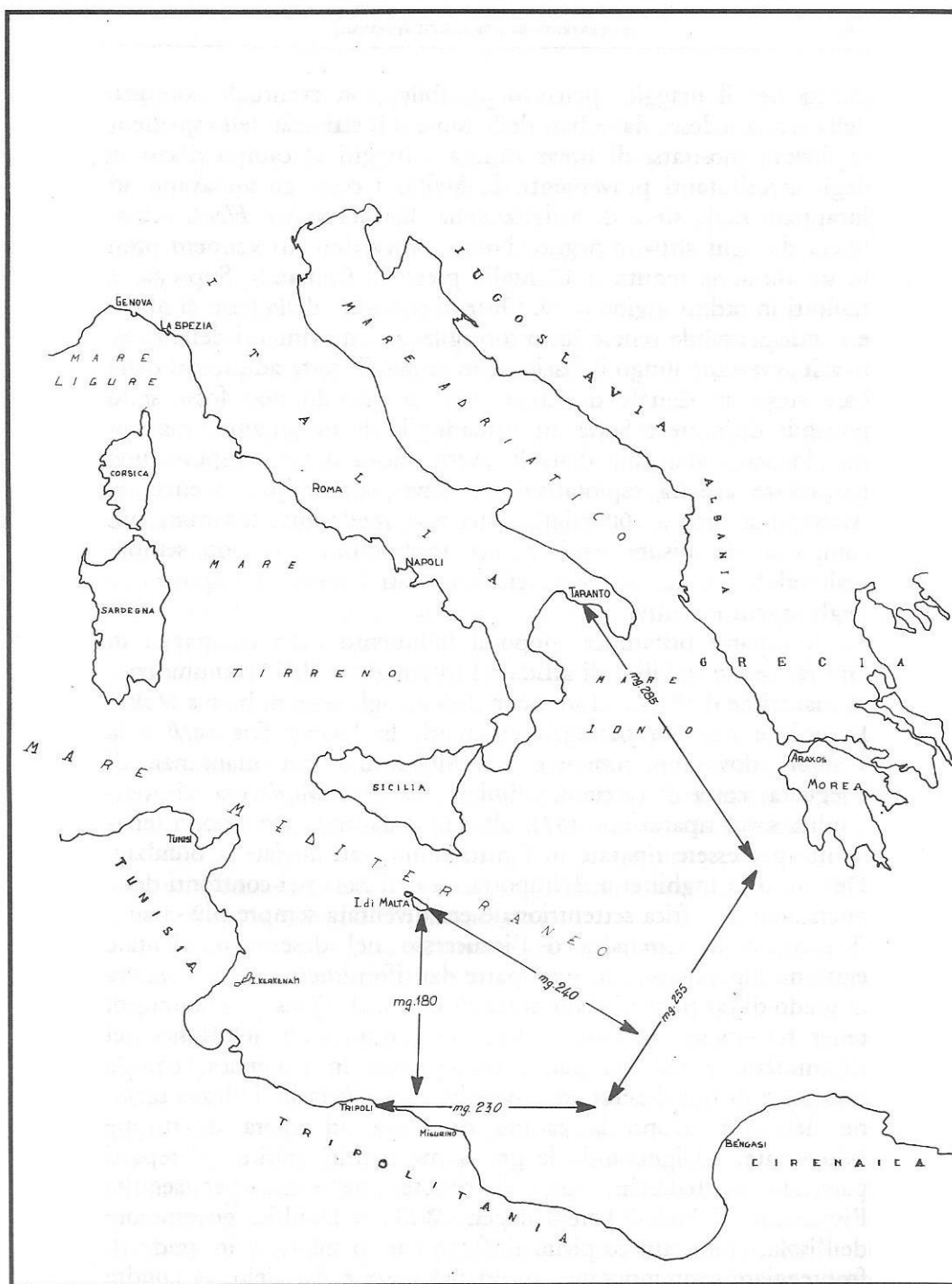
Can not escape the oddity of the proposal that the recognition of the difficulties of an advance into Egypt opposed as a remedy a double offensive, which would involve, as a simple premise, an increase strong--even if temporary--of transports towards Africa, at *Wolfsschanze* and many doubts existed. There was recently a long *memorandum*, under which the French Council of Ministers informed the German Government that it could not consider the problem of supplies to Libya through Tunisia in isolation and recognize the need to frame overall relations France-axis, especially after the existing State of affairs in Syria. The France then demanded that aspects of collaboration with the axis to be re-examined completely and that venue was also Italy, to clarify the Franco-Italian armistice relations ⁽⁴⁴⁾. So the reminder on the situation in the Mediterranean presented to Hitler on July 25 is expressed in rather pessimistic tones

Meanwhile, in Italy, where the search for the most appropriate way to ensure an adequate air protection to convoys had become a constant preoccupation, a joint Commission had accomplished a new in depth review on the Eastern Mediterranean basin, concluding with emphasize convenience to follow fast convoys headed to Tripoli routes to the East of Malta, less subject to air the opposing offense ⁽⁴⁵⁾. West-routes between Pantelleria, Lampedusa and the coast of Tunisia-though shorter were more dangerous as a result of the greater proximity of Malta: the fighter escort did not have enough autonomy and the ships AA artillery, while highly effective, was not able to ensure the safety of transport. The existence of mined areas, which we asked, was also to delimit on a long stretch North and South of Pantelleria, restricted forced passage ranges, probably perfectly identified by British reconnaissance. Lengthening of the eastern routes caused path, it is true, a loss in the exploitation of tonnages, but instead is carried over the convoys the radius of the bombers based at Malta ⁽⁴⁶⁾ (sketch No. 32).

Following these conclusions, the July 7 More States of the R. Marina and R. Aeronautiva have enacted provisions for the protection of the fast convoys on the routes: systematic surveillance of opponents Eastern naval forces coming from Malta; aerial protection of convoys during navigation

The routes to the East of Malta LE ROTTE A LEVANTE DI MALTA

Schizzo n. 32



day for the greatest possible path with any German fighter competition from bases of Morea. The effectiveness of the device was to be short-lived. Escaped the scope of torpedo bombers from Malta, the convoys were going to run into the sphere of activity of the *Mediterranean Fleet*, now free from any other commitment. New measures were taken in a meeting held on July 17 at the Comando Supremo and translated into orders on July 20. In addition to the basic control of Malta was essential to keep under surveillance the movements of enemy naval forces along the beam of the likely routes by alleging base itself to Crete. Until it had been possible to move to Suda a maritime reconnaissance squadron, the general staff of the R. Aeronautica was to have a particular exploratory activity to monitor the directions from Alexandria, up to 200 nautical miles from the base itself. In short, a set of measures theoretically sound, but not always achievable with the necessary effectiveness given the means at the disposal of the executive bodies.

By the British, after the failure of the campaign in Greece, it was agreed to entrust the interruption of axis maritime communications to submarines and aircraft based at Malta. The only efficient, battleships *Queen Elizabeth* and *Valiant*, had to remain in Alexandria for lack of adequate escort of destroyers. The *Formidable* was in Alexandria under repair ⁽⁴⁷⁾, other ships damaged too badly to be repaired in Egypt were sent to Bombay, Durban or England. The importance of the island towards Northern Africa operations had become increasingly clear. The success or failure in Cyrenaica in the Western Egyptian desert depended largely on supplies that Italy was unable to reach Rommel's forces. This required to take the behind for the purposes of interruption of the flow of supplies and, on the other hand, advanced in Cyrenaica, with the conquests of new airports, would have made it easier to power on the island. After the fall of Crete by aircraft-born troops, and ignoring the serious losses suffered by German paratroopers units, the fear was about to follow the invasion of Malta. So on Gen. William Dobbie, Governor of the island, demanded a substantial reinforcement that would able to face assaults from the sea and contemporaries from the sky. In London it was decided to send two infantry battalions, a regiment

heavy AA artillery and a lightweight, thirty pieces from the countryside with its personnel and a number of pilots and certain specialists of the *Royal Air Force*. The convoy had departed from Gibraltar and had the name of *Substance*.

The Substance convoy, consisting of six merchant ships and escorted by Force H- which had added a battleship and three cruisers of the *Home Fleet*, as the Admiralty believed that the R. Marina have five battleships and eleven cruisers — entered the Mediterranean at night on July 20. A seventh ship, *Leinster*, had stranded in Gibraltar, leaving on land a thousand men, almost all of the *Royal Air Force*. While the entire formation was at sea, eight submarines patrolled the Tyrrhenian and the battleships of the *Mediterranean Fleet*, left Alexandria, proceeded westward to be heading to Malta to detect the convoy and then escort it to Alexandria.

Only the July 22 Italian aerial reconnaissance spotted Force H off of Bona,-but didn't notice of transport. On the morning of 23 nine bombers and six torpedo bombers launched on the formation. The *Fulmar* of *Ark Royal*, so up in the air, immediately managed to intercept the bombers whose attack failed; but the torpedo bombers sank a destroyer and badly damaged a cruiser. New raids in the afternoon had no outcome and the Adm. Somerville with Force H, arrived at the Strait of Sicily, reversed course to move westward. The convoy was escorted by Force X (three cruisers and eight destroyers), which in a second Italian air strike was another destroyers damaged.

In this meantime departed from Malta eight large steamships, empty, divided into groups according to their speed, led by *Breconshire* and headed to Gibraltar.

Rather than continue to Pantelleria, as was usually done, X-Force and the convoy turned north-eastwards to reduce the risk of running in the minefields. This precaution also benefit to take away the night search of Italian reconnaissance; However after midnight PT action succeeded in hitting a transport with a torpedo. On the afternoon of the 24th convoy arrived in Valletta. The same evening the Force X began the journey home and the next morning met with Force H, who cruised to the southwest of Sardinia. The 27th the two naval forces were in Gibraltar; the day

followed the unloaded convoy of the *Breconshire*. The operation *Substance* paid the hit with the loss of one destroyer and of seven aircraft and a damaged cruiser, a destroyer and two freighters: the price, all in all, not heavy. At this point a mission took place from which Italy was waiting for a good result but that was poor. The presence in Malta of a British convoy suggested a night to raid the merchant ships at anchor in Valletta. It was not a sudden idea, but implementing an undertaking already planned by time and postponed for various reasons. Warranty and feature of the attack was to be cooperation between the air force and Navy. Took part in the action nine explosive Motor launches (MTM) and two manned torpedoes (SLC), towed them, up to 15 miles from Malta of the fast sloop *Diana*, then by two MAS until about 3 miles from La Valletta, and then conveyed by a special motorboat (MTSM) up to 800-900 meters from the dam. The decision dated back to July 19 for a given execution between the 24th and 28th and was the convoy of *Breconshire*. As we know, this left the 23rd from Malta, but the next day came the transport of *Substance*.

The studies carried out on the basis of information and photographic documentation collected by X *Fliegerkorps* and R. Aeronautica, had appeared the possibility to force the port of Valletta at the arched bridge that linked the port area at the pier of St. Elmo. It seemed impossible with two SLC to a gap in the protective network to allow the passage of small boats. The 25th the general staff of the R. Aeronautica was warned that the raid was carried out in the night. During daily contacts held between the two general staff had been defined as the part of the R. Aeronautica: three bombing missions, respectively at 1:40, at 2:40 and at 4:30 on 26 July. The first two disruptive purposes and to distract the attention of the enemy from the front to the sea. Also switching of headlamps would facilitate orientation and approach of special vehicles and anti-aircraft defense reaction would cover the noise of the boats engines. The third bombardment would have particular character intensity. From 5:15 then the fighters were to protect the route of return of the MAS. Unfortunately the company resulted in a disaster. Aside from the fact that the defense was alerted since midnight, thanks to the track discovered by radar, the air strikes could not be executed as planned ⁽⁴⁸⁾ and two SLC found themselves lagging behind on the

march of about an hour. To retrieve, in a certain sense, the disadvantage, Major Tesei sacrificed himself to open the hole in the net. At 4:30 the commander of the boat, very concerned about the problems, decided to start the action at the cost of a general sacrifice so that at least one motorboat entered the port. The first two, therefore, were intended to break through the blockage, namely to carry out the task for the unlucky SLC. The bridge exploded (with conscious sacrifice of the driver of the second motorboat), but unfortunately the collapse of a pylon finally blocked the passage. The explosion, instantly lit spotlights illuminating the roads and a concentrated fire raged on the surviving motorboats destroying them. Worse still, on the way back the *Beaufighter* launched on two MAS and MTL destroying them ⁽⁴⁹⁾.

At the meeting held in the morning of the 27th at the Comando Supremo and presided over by Gen. Magli, with Gen. Mattei, Bureau Chief of the operations staff of R. Aeronautica, was terse and eloquent:

“The choice of the day the action was favorable for the naval action, in view of the alleged enemy situation of the ships in Malta; was unfavorable for the air force regarding the availability of means, because in the days leading up to the action it had to provide for intensive use of its units.

Sicily's aircraft could not do more. The fighter aircraft left in two parts, the first of ten units at 5:12, but haze cause, the MAS to be unseen; they were lured by an intense artillery fire in an area where the MAS had already been attacked by an enemy fighter and torched; the second part started at 06:00.

I repeat that the fighters cannot guarantee the security of the Canal from an attack” ⁽⁵⁰⁾.

Definitely in terms of joint cooperation we were to first steps.

In Gibraltar was left over a thousand men to be transported to Malta as soon as possible. For a high-speed trip could only use warships. Such need arose from the operation *Style*, made by X-Force, formed this time by two cruisers, a destroyer and two fast Minelayers. The ships departed Gibraltar on 31 July carrying 1,700 men and 130 tons of equipment and arrived in Valletta on August 2. Even for *Style* Force H behaved as in the previous case, crossing off of Sardinia, in order to keep the Italian defense on alert. The two British formations returned together to Gibraltar on 4 August without damage. With

the Malta garrison received reinforcements was now the nearly 24,000 men, including 13 battalions, 112 heavy and light 118 A/A. guns, 104 pieces artillery of small and medium caliber, 15 *Hurricane* and 60 *Hurricane II*. Beyond that, having encountered some «stretch mark» in Italian convoys, monitoring the enemy gave Malta a powerful new search tool. The Swordfish were already equipped with short-range radar, highly useful at night or with very low visibility; now were assigned three Wellington equipped with radar for great distances, therefore a Swordfish torpedo bombers would go immediately to a Wellington located target.

You have to wonder why, especially on the occasion of the complex operation *Substance*, the fleet has not taken to the sea. The answer is very simple: Unfortunately the maritime aerial reconnaissance spotted the enemy too late to allow for a timely intervention before the passage of the Strait of Sicily ⁽⁵¹⁾. As a result, the enforcement action was committed once again to raids by the R. Aeronautica.

As Malta had been well supplied, on August 28 London decided another shipment of essential materials. The new-named operation *Halberd*-had to be conducted more or less like the previous one. The night on 25 September, nine ships of the convoy entered the Mediterranean. They were escorted by Force H of Somerville, the aircraft carrier *Ark Royal*, three battleships (*Nelson*, *Prince of Wales* and *Rodney*), five cruisers and 18 destroyers. Nine submarines were placed off of the Italian ports and the *Mediterranean Fleet* mounted a diversionary action. Following the sighting of enemy formation, on 26 September was put into operation the contrast alignment. The Italian Fleet, controlled by Adm. Jachino and constituted by the battleships *Littorio* and *Vittorio Veneto* with the three *Trieste* type cruisers and 20 destroyers, sailed the morning of the next day in the South of Sardinia, to an extent to meet the opponent. Arrived at the mouth of the Strait of Sicily, Adm. Somerville went back, leaving a part- Force X, under the command of Adm. H.M. Burrough-the task of escorting the convoy until destination, under the protection of aircraft based on Malta. Force X consisted of 5 cruisers and 9 destroyers. As darkness fell new Italian torpedo attacks managed to sink a merchant ship. Just before

noon on the 28th the cruisers entered the port of Valletta and a few hours later came the convoy with 50,000 tons of supplies. Provisions amassed in Malta could last until May 1942, except for coal and fuels. Between September 30 and October 1 all British formations returned to Gibraltar, along with a few empty steamers that had left Malta by taking advantage of the arrival of Force H.

Here, we must mention the moodiness created within the Italian Fleet, to the disappointment of missing out on the occasion of *Tiger* and then *Substance*, and the bitterness for the failure of the special naval unit in heroic raid of July 26. Everything “*had a depressing effect on the morale of the Fleet’s crews, so much so that I thought-he wrote then Jachino-must be made again to the head the G. S. of the Navy need God does not withhold more to port our naval force, in the event of a new English convoy passing in the Mediterranean, to prevent morale suffered and lost it the necessary thrust of combativeness*”⁽⁵²⁾.

After an empty output at the end of August, operation *Halberd* showed up so as not to be missed opportunity, because the exceptional deployment of British forces had been cleverly hidden from Somerville. The Italian fleet was always under the constraint of maximum directives issued by the Comando Supremo: battle only under conditions of strong superiority of forces and within range of the fighters. Jachino, despite all the best intentions of approaching the opponent, remained in serious doubt as to the actual number of Force H because of inconsistent information provided by aerial reconnaissance, then went on to give credit to the afternoon of the 27th sightings and decided to avoid a confrontation against a superior naval: forces or he had to observe

“The risk was that time really serious for us, especially since the air force of Sardinia, which that day attacked with great boldness the enemy and torpedoed (without repeat) *Nelson*, failed to provide the necessary coverage for our ships to defend them from the torpedo bombers of the *Ark Royal*. Once again you had to detect, on that occasion, the lack of coordination between air attack and naval encounter; The Navy and air force conducted each on their own parallel war but disconnected, and the end results were necessarily lower than you could get with a friendly and complete unity of action.”⁽⁵³⁾.

Sending only two battleships, while there were five in full efficiency, was conditioning. Perhaps the limitation

the forces was due to concerns dictated by the scarcity of naphtha, however, given the desire to meet the opponent, perhaps it would be worth it to risk another empty outcome. He also neglected the possibility of attacking the convoy after the Strait of Sicily with a group of cruisers. On the basis of what will happen in 1942, it seems safe to assume that the results would have been better.

The Adm. Giuseppe Fioravanzo, summoned on 6 October by Cavallero information about the operation of September 27, had to declare that cooperation between the Navy and the air force was still sloppy, insufficient and maritime reconnaissance, in the particular case of that day, major obstacle had been determined by the haze⁽⁵⁴⁾. But R. Aeronautica, which was to attack from British formations, only losing three bombers, six torpedo bombers and fourteen fighters⁽⁵⁵⁾, badly accepted the fleet's reversal of route, considering that if it had not taken the thirty Mc 200 fighter for its air security would instead was allocated to increase the stock of the bombers. Above all-according to Pricolo - *"this unsatisfactory result was a consequence of absolute order of the Supreme command to attack only the warships, with the intention of crippling efficiency, so as to facilitate the subsequent intervention of/to our team"*⁽⁵⁶⁾.

To be true, the fuel problem was real.

At the beginning of the conflict the R. Marina had 100,000 tones of fuel oil aboard ships and less than 1,700,000 tons distributed in stores in at home and overseas. During 1940 the consumption average about 100,000 tons nearly a month against an influx of 15,000 tons per month. The Germany, also in trouble, getting a supply to Italy when certainly had use of Romanian production. In mid-1941 R. Marina took pains to succumb to 60,000 tones, naphtha monthly, not only much lower quantity requirements but disbursed without any regularity. Refueling began in the third quarter of 1941, with an average of 20,000 tons per month that gradually reached 50,000 in December. Meanwhile Italian stocks were reduced drastically, so that at the end of 1941 the R. Marina had just 220,000 tons.

Adm. Weichold since February of that year had turned to the OKW in easily prophetic tone:

“The effects of naphtha’s situation adding to the already great potentialities of the enemy and in the future the naphtha even more. The high command is already facing a crisis that affects the operational decisions (...). The war in the Mediterranean and the transport of supplies in Africa are severely affected by the lack of naphtha (...)” ⁽⁵⁷⁾.

Since the fuel shortage was severely felt can be supported by the call made by Cavallero to Riccardi on September 2, on occasions of rumors about a British fleet at sea: “*not committed the fleet unless target foe's vital. However, the fleet must remain in a State of preparation in its bases*” and immediately dictated Gen. Magli the following phonogram for Supermarina and Superaereo:

“In relation to news received about possible enemy fleet movement from Gibraltar and in relation to fuel availability please prepare to note any combined action with the insidious and subtle vessels use by appropriate means use Supermarina & in particular torpedo planes from the Superaereo” ⁽⁵⁸⁾.

In fact, the consistency of the torpedo planes began to be sensitive. Four squadrons of S. 79 (with 13 units) available at May 15, was passed at the end of August to five squadrons of S. 79 (one more than the previous ones, but altogether 32 luminaries), three by S. 84 (with 16 aircraft), two flocks of S. 84 (the 36th with 32 planes and the 7th only with 6 because of ongoing transformation). In essence, 80 in line with trained personnel and 70 torpedoes. The production program of S. 84 was based on an average of 14 aircraft per month, with a tendency to a constant increase. That included 12 torpedo units for September, 35 in October, 70 in December and 100 in the spring. In 25 August talks between Cavallero and Keitel, the topic of supplies in North Africa was touched rather quickly. Cavallero had noted that the R. Marina had already done much and much was doing, but that the security of convoys was always uncertain given the lack of autonomy of the Italian fighter. On 29 August, just after Mussolini's departure for return to Italy, the OKW presented to Hitler a worrying reminder: for the first time expressed the opinion that the transactions in Russia would probably continue in 1942. This assessment had

impact on the issue of the Mediterranean, to which about von Rintelen was expressing in pessimistically, so ask what the *X Fliegerkorps* returned to Sicily. Furthermore, even the command in Chief of the *Kriegsmarine* had represented the unsustainability of the situation: in his opinion, Italy was not able to provide sufficient protection for the convoy so there was a well-founded fear of being hunted by Africa, with dramatic repercussions on the progress of the war.

It was necessary to prevent supply problems to Axis forces in Libya and the greatest chance of strengthening the Commonwealth forces in Egypt, making it a new and more powerful British offensive. Hitler was convinced, but only in part, of the need to intervene and dispose the Mediterranean transfer of six submarines of the Goeben group, a flotilla of eight minesweepers and one of ten PT boats. In addition, 13 September, ordered that the main task of the *X Fliegerkorps* became-with immediate effect-protection of maritime traffic to North Africa, including Tripoli. In second priority was the insult to British ships and, more generally, to the British supplies to Egypt. Goering disagreed ⁽⁵⁹⁾. Obeyed the order, but he limited the action of *X Fliegerkorps* to routes from Greece to Cyrenaica and between Benghazi and Derna, therefore excluding those from Italy, the most important. Then, on 16 September, addressed Pricolo an invitation for a joint examination of the operational situation and to determine if new agreements aimed at increasing the effectiveness of the two decisions. The Conference took place on October 2, the Romintern was not very conclusive. Goering was clear-in theory-the war in the Mediterranean, but rather imprecise knowledge of practical and environmental aspects. Just left hoping a possible increase in fuel allocation within a few weeks. For his part, Pricolo announced the setting up a new base in Pantelleria.

In three months, from July to September, while the three British convoys were able to reach Malta nearly complete, twenty axis merchant for a total of 118,450 tons s.t. were sunk. Of these, eight for air strikes and eleven by British submarines. However, it is undeniable the Italian commitment to increase transport safety. Regardless of the use of all suitable type naval units, was increased in

so conspicuous the anti-aircraft defense. In this regard, Mar. Lloyd wrote:

"The first reaction of the heavy losses suffered by his ships was, in June 1941, the increase of naval and aerial escort. The second was in August, when every merchant vessel was armed with several guns. As a result the damage suffered by *Blenheim* grew in alarming measure: in August and in September reached 20%. In September there were no less than six single seat Italian fighters around each convoy, with a escort of four *Junkers* 88.⁽⁶⁰⁾

At the end of September was willing that, starting in October, went on-line one squadron of long range Re. 2000, located at Trapani with advanced base in Pantelleria, could ensure the escort in the central section of the route, about 35 miles, in that section, namely, that until then had remained without air protection for the limited autonomy of the apparatus used for escort service. In September, Adm. Weichold sent Rome an alarming report:

"Today, as always, the British fleet dominating the Mediterranean (...). Britain's most dangerous weapon is represented by submarines, especially those operating from Malta. During the period in question there were 36 attacks by submarines, 19 of them crowned with success (...).

Because of the weakness of the Italian air force in Sicily, the threat of aerial and naval forces operating from Malta against the Italian-German maritime route in North Africa has been, during the last few weeks, continually increasing (...). Also are launched from Malta almost daily air strikes against Tripoli. In recent times, the Italian ports of Sicily were frequently attacked by British aircraft (...).

Italian aviation formations that are currently in Sicily and Northern Africa are insufficient to halt the British naval and air operations (...).

Caution once again, with urgent character, not to underestimate the dangers from the naval situation in the Mediterranean.⁽⁶¹⁾

The month of October saw the Italian side from the start of a new cycle of transport with the use of troops on board destroyers which, thanks to its high speed, managed to fulfill most of the crossing over one night. Soon, however, she learned that in Malta were making more news. Not only was the 10th submarine flotilla, but after lengthy discussions, the Admiralty had decided to send in a force to attack surface ships. On 21 October he arrived at Valletta Force K: two cruisers from the *Home Fleet* and two destroyers supplied by Force H in Gibraltar. In addition, eleven

Albacore bombers, equipped with additional fuel tanks were added to the already significant number of existing aircraft. So was clearly strengthen the defense of convoys, using cruisers divisions and even battleships, as well as the normal means of escort, without adequate results mainly due to continuing technical inferiority of night planes and radar. At the same time the German Navy provided to the plant in the Mediterranean twenty *U-Boote*. Is required to devise a way to fundamentally alter the State of subjection which were the means of communication with the Libyan side. This constraint was, unfortunately, a negative factor, subject to permanent variable values depending on the overall situation and at that moment, threatening a negative determinant influence on the field of battle of the Marmarica.

The way was only one: take Malta. Once again the attention led on this issue. Already the October 11 Adm. Sansonetti, Vice Chief of staff of the R. Marina, had made the point that studies had not been ever abandoned, concluding on the fundamental importance of the intervention of the R. Aeronautica a the purposes of successful and on whether to fall back on the provision of special boats about 30 tons. Three days after Cavallero, convinced of the inevitability of such action given the vanished hopes to use Bisena, Roatta wrote:

“To have nothing to do with the current situation in the Mediterranean, I need to update and complete the studies already made concerning possible operation for the occupation of the island of Malta, and develop them in part concerning possible arrangements, in particular with regard to the necessary special training of troops for the enterprise (...)”⁽⁶²⁾.

Germany was also reflecting on talks Goering-Pricolo, the certain prolongation of Russia's campaign, on reports from Rome. Von Rintelen was summoned to the *Wolfsschanze*. On 24 October, Hitler received and wanted a full picture of the situation and air transport. Von Rintelen did not ask without half measures and described the terms of the deal, claiming the priority of attacks on Malta and the defense of the routes from Italy to Tripoli. This insistence, which added to the protests of Adm. Weichold, he hinted to Hitler the serious possibility of a collapse in the Mediterranean theatre. First of all asked if Mussolini and the Italian Comando Supremo

were to agree on the presence of another German Corps in the South or insular Italy (thing that Goering had not recommended). Reassured on that point, established to propose formally sending the Commander of the 2nd *Luftflotte* (Mar. Alben Kesselring) and II *Fliegerkorps* (Gen. Bruno Loerzer), which was stationed in Sicily. By Kesselring would have depended on II and X *Fliegerkorps*, as well as the units of *Fliegerführer Afrika*. However Hitler wanted to gain more influence in the conduct of the war in the Mediterranean theatre. The Commander of 2nd *Luftflotte* had to take responsibility and therefore the direction of transport for Africa, resulting in authority over units of R. Marina and R. Aeronautica engaged in specific tasks. Kesselring would assume the title of *Oberbefehlshaber Süd* (OBS), i.e. "Commander-in-Chief of the South". Already in his letter of 20 July Hitler had proposed to Mussolini the opportunity of a "*substantial, straight Italian-German cooperation*" with regard to traffic with Libya, proposing that the Staffs of the *Kriegsmarine* (Adm. Weichold) and the *Luftwaffe* (Gen. von Pohl) were used "*in the framework of the Italian Comando Supremo.*" Mussolini had replied that collaboration already existed, however for this collaboration the desired shape was oriented to supporting German liaison bodies to their respective Staffs of armed force. Now von Rintelen was to repeat-with a personal letter of the *Führer*-the topic, obviously with the offer of the II Air Corps and a consistent number of *U-Boote*. See, further, the conclusion of the Italian-German contacts.

As you can imagine, in Rome and Cyrene worries grew. Among other things, the R. Marina was heavily conditioned by the acute shortage of fuel. Missed the Naphtha for escorts ⁽⁶³⁾; loading of materials was disorganized for the bombardment of the ports of Brindisi, Naples, Tripoli and Benghazi. It was also necessary to discharge the convoy from a port and the escort by another, without any possibility of preliminary agreements. Even the transport of men by air had seen no appreciable results. On 5 October Cavallero he referred to Mussolini in bitter tone; then with a series of measures he can succeed, as originally planned, to transport overseas a thousand people a day with individual weapons, at least for three weeks. But it was a new disappointment. And Cavallero prepared the exoneration of Pricolo:

“Mr. Pricolo-wrote to Mussolini-I gave this morning the Kingdom sheet with which justifies itself by not being able to keep the commitment made the day a current air transport for Libya with a capacity of 1000 men in one day.

The capacity that Mr. Pricolo believes he can get is 500 men in a day, but even on this figure makes reservations. This will be in any case a daily average of 200-250 men.

In the do confusion among the various causes that can affect the continuity of the transport. There *are* causes of unexpected character, quotas and on these causes it is perfectly understood that we must rely. But all other causes of non-technical and technical notes were all from the beginning of the study.

I had to conclude that in the space of 25 days Superaereo changed opinion three times and I could not allow the desire to succeed, allegedly in full good faith by Others. Pricolo, could justify such a method.

I concluded by saying to Mr. Pricolo that in wartime, when confronted with situations that require prompt decision, is not allowed to miss three times in a row in the evaluation of a problem maneuvering of forces and means, whose urgency and responsibility must be just underlined (the problem carried away from 19 September). ⁽⁶⁴⁾.

At Cyrene complained that supplies from the Mainland were reduced to purely "*random chance*". In October on five convoys for a total of 14 steamers for Italians, 12 for Germans and three tankers, heading to Tripoli had only one convoy with three ships for the Italians. On five convoys totaling 17 steamers for Italians and 4 for Germans to Benghazi had reached three convoys with 5 ships for the Italians and 1 for the Germans. On October 31 Gambara sent a message to Cavallero:

“General Rommel will start tomorrow 10 November for Rome to claim that 60,000 tons of material on promises, only 8,000 were delivered. Please bear in mind our deficit greatly transport situation, which puts us in great inferiority not only with friends but also in serious crisis”. ⁽⁶⁵⁾.

In essence, considering the events of 1940 and 1941, almost at the end, you can recognize that the real valve of traffic between Italy and Libya assumed during the 1941- and only then-from Malta had no influence on failure of Graziani's forces. This was determined by organic deficiencies of the Italian military and strategic vision of a wrong war. One of the blunders of strategic nature was just the feeling of being able to neutralize the Malta

air pressure alone. When the X *Fliegerkorps* was moved to Greece, you touched the gravity of the mistake in not having addressed in due time and with the necessary determination the question of Malta. It seems acceptable, if not within certain limits, the thesis that the availability of Bisena would solve the crisis: it would simply be circumvented-undeleted-the obstacle of the offense to the convoys, but undeniably would have aggravated the ever solved problem of vehicles and increased that of fuels.

Faded hope to open a new line of communication with the ports of Tunisia, took seriously the occupation of the island. Because, even without state this openly, it was already pretty obvious to everyone that the enterprise was to be virtually impractical with the Italian vehicles, German decisions remained conditioned the solution is the power of the troops in Cyrenaica and the operating problem.

4. THE ITALIAN-GERMAN AUTUMN PREPARATIONS.

In Northern Africa was the course of overall structural rearrangement of which had been spoken. In Western Cyrenaica the divisions *Ariete* and *Trento* were assuming new organic, one near Bena-Manuba and the other at Gazala. The *Trieste* was landing in Tripoli and gathering for Homs; its transfer was planned in the area of Maraua- Slonta in the *gebel* in the second half of September. The 10th of the same month took the Corps of maneuver (CAM), where Gambara had proposed the designation of "Sahara Corps", denomination not accepted for the clear emphasis that characterized. The *Panzergruppe Afrika's* spearhead ⁽⁶⁶⁾ had the XXI Italian Corps around Tobruk and the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* at the border ⁽⁶⁷⁾. The latter, in particular, the command was at Bardia, the 15th Arm. Div. West of Sidi Azeiz, the 21st Arm. Div. Southeast of Marsa Lucch, the z. b. v. *Afrika* Division between fort Campbell and Sollum, the *Savona* between fort Capuzzo and Sidi Omar. The fort of Bardia was ruled by a German-Italian garrison ⁽⁶⁸⁾.

The hot spot was Tobruk. In front of the stronghold Rommel continued to study how to seize it. On 16 August had held to report to Acroma, at the command of XXI Corps, minutely examining besieging deployment.

In his opinion the Ras Medauuar position was particularly delicate; given its importance in the observation domain on port of Tobruk, the enemy had recently (August 3) tried to seize it with an attack on both sides of the salient. If a retry was crowned by success, possession of Ras Medauuar would allow for Australians the observation of good stretch of the *Brescia* and the control of the “axis Road”. In this connection, he decided to replace the 15th *Schützen* Brigade, much tried by fighting and diseases, with two position battalions reinforced by anti-tank weapons. In addition the entire western sector until Gasr el Clecha-alignment fence post (not included) would pass under the responsibility of the *Brescia*. The expected arrival of four groups of 149/35 of the 5th artillery corps, two of them had to take sides in the area of *Brescia*, freeing up the German group from 210 that would be returned to Sollum, and two in the area of the *Bologna*. When they arrived from Germany the eighty heavy pieces in the program, most of them would take the position at the *Bologna*. Comparatively, the area of the *Brescia* was considered strong; the *Pavia* strong left, weak right and very sharp in the Center (i.e. the astride road for el-Adem). The deployment of *Bologna*, the Southeast section of investment, had a weakness: an advanced place opponent who controlled a solution of continuity in Italian dispositions ⁽⁶⁹⁾. Therefore it was necessary to make the widest use of minefields, entrusting the monitoring structures or patrolling.

Ultimately, the encirclement of the fort was entrusted to three divisions of the XXI Corps: The *Brescia*, reinforced by the II/241st and III/258th German infantry, and by 24th artillery grouping 105/28 and four German batteries; the *Pavia*, reinforced by 16th artillery grouping 105/28; the *Bologna*, reinforced by the 15th stopping company and from 340th artillery Group (a group of 77/28). In the hand of the Corps Command remained the 5th Corps artillery group in the course of influx, the XXXII battalion of sappers, the X battalion engineer miners and the IXV links battalion. Defensive planning was informed a few criteria: all-out defense of the cornerstones of the company deployed to the Board; fire organization particularly appreciated; immediate counterattacks aimed at nipping any initial successes of opposing sorties; aggressive character of the investment using patrols

of combat. In particular, the *Brescia* had six battalions in the first Echelon and two in the second. The *Pavia*, six battalions in the first Echelon and a battalion and a machine-gunner group in the second; the *Bologna*, four battalions in the first Echelon and one in the second. Second Echelon units was reserved to preside over arrears and cornerstones to nip any attempt of infiltration. The command of composition and terminology is located at Gazala tactical command to Gambut.

FORMATION OF THE CORPS OF MANEUVERING (as of September 10, 1941)
<p>Commander: Gen. Gastone Gambara Gen. representative: Gen. Albino Mannerini Chief of the G.S.: Lt. Col. Carlo Scaglia.</p> <p><i>Ariete</i> Arm. Division. (Gen. Mario Balotta): 8th bersaglieri; 132nd tank with M 13 tanks; 32nd tank with L 3 tankets; 132nd artillery; Divisional units and services.</p> <p><i>Trento</i> Mot Division. (Gen. Giuseppe De Stefanis): 61st infantry; 62nd infantry; 7th bersaglieri; 46th artillery; Divisional units and services.</p> <p><i>Trieste</i> Mot Division. (Gen. Alessandro Piazzoni): 65th infantry. 66th infantry; 9th bersaglieri; 21st artillery; Divisional units and services.</p> <p>Corps troops: Bn. Armored Cars of the PAI; Flying artillery group.</p>

Rommel was understandably in tension and suffered from eating disorders gastrointestinal problems as, for that matter, most of the fighters of Africa. And, for how little they cure, could not but be the criticisms that were leveled by many high-ranking German officers. Two things above all were poorly supported: referral to official court martial had, in his opinion, failed an operation and the action of "erratic" command ⁽⁷⁰⁾. Even with the Comando Superiore relationships were not particularly excellent. On the other hand he was beloved by officers and troops. Quite appropriately Maj. Friedrich von Mellenthin, Chief of the *Panzergruppe* information Office's, observed that "*between Rommel and the soldiers there was a mutual understanding that cannot be explained or analyzed, but that is a gift of the gods*" ⁽⁷¹⁾.

On 6 September Rommel represented to the Comando Superiore his own ideas on the subject of operations. Began with synthesize evaluation of the situation. The bulk of British forces was engaged in the Middle East. Three infantry divisions and a mechanized Cavalry in Iraq-Syria, two infantry divisions and a Cavalry Brigade in Palestine-Jordanians. Remained in Egypt two armored divisions and five infantry-apart from three Egyptian divisions used simply for the defense of certain points in the Delta and the Interior-concentrated for the most part between Alexandria and Cairo ⁽⁷²⁾. At the border seemed to spread only the 7th Armored Division and 4th Indian. "*With these forces the British cannot conduct an offensive against Libya.*" However exceptionally favorable situation could change radically if it were fall the prospect of a German threat from the Caucasus. Namely that the British would almost certainly moved to the West at least a second Armored Division, the Division of cavalry and four or five infantry divisions to permanently eliminate the danger against Egypt.

"In my opinion-wrote Rommel-you absolutely must take advantage of the current fast extraordinary favorable military situation, before it can take over a change in the location of enemy forces. Better to immediately attack Egypt. But to achieve it missing two premises:

- a) the necessary supplies and the completion of the units for such a large operation;
- b) elimination of Tobruk

As for an offensive against Egypt is not possible in a short time to provide needed supplies here, you have to confine itself to the rapid elimination of Tobruk. In order to take advantage of the current favorable situation, the military *occupation of Tobruk* must take place at the latest for mid-November 1941 (...)" ⁽⁷³⁾.

As a result, it was necessary to accelerate significantly the flow of reinforcements for the *Deutsches Afrikakorps*, roughly double the tonnage for maritime transport and "*strengthen considerably*" the protection of convoys with naval units and aviation. The question of the reinforcement of the escort will become a *casus belli* between the commanders of the *Panzergruppe* and the 5th Air Fleet. To conduct the attack on the fort was estimated necessary the following forces: The German Corp with the 15th or else the 21st *Panzerdivision* and most of the Special *Afrika* Division; Italian Corp with the *Ariete* and *Trento* and *Trieste*; all Italian and German heavy artillery available with five days of fire. And Rommel concluded: "*Please tell me if you can count to the attack on Tobruk and the set time and with the necessary heavy artillery.*" Bastico responded immediately agreeing with analysis and with the desires. He however pointed out the dubious possibility that the quantities of materials flowing from Italy more than when it happened; the contrary opinion the use of a motorized Divisions of Italy; the need that arrived at least two other divisions, including a armored, so you have to hand a mass of highly reactive maneuver, composed a *Panzerdivision*, an Armored Division and two Italian motorized to oppose British threat on the Sollum outlined possibly coinciding with the siege force. The letter was quite explicit:

"Nothing against that you pursue the preparation time limits laid down, except to decide action at the appropriate time, according to the preparation that has been reached and the situation which you will present in the Middle East; situation which may also advise you to overlook Tobruk to move towards the Nile" ⁽⁷⁴⁾.

In other words, as von Rintelen remarked, Bastico was believed possible to continue the offensive in Egypt leaving a simple block around Tobruk.

The Comando Supremo was following the issue, partly because Cavallero-despite the concerns aroused by unexpected revolt erupted in July in Croatia and especially in

Montenegro-was determined to keep an eye on the main theater of Italian operations, where for over frictions between the commanders were periodically afloat, in part because Rommel tended to call into question the Comando Supremo, through von Rintelen and the OKW, to overcome the “obstacle” Bastico. Cavallero had already taken a position on relocation to the motorized Corps. This was scheduled in Ain el Gazala – Bir Hakeim-Garet Meriem, at Tobruk and just over 150 kilometers from Sollum, in terms of being able to maneuver on the enemy penetration operating wide-ranging to fall on the backs of Tobruk. Rommel would have preferred a more advanced location at the height of the fort, perhaps also because, were found to the East of the meridian of Gazala, the CAM would be automatically passed under the jurisdiction of the *Panzergruppe*. The Comando Superiore is expressed negatively as, in his opinion, the move wouldn't significantly improved the timeliness of intervention on the Sollum, while he favored the possibility of truning the entire front of the axle. Agreeing with those considerations and to maintain a reserve in the hands of Bastico, so as to enable him to fend off the possibility of landing or of threats from within, the Comando Supremo therefore sanctioned the relocation proposal:

“In addition to the reasons above-stated tactics the latter's operations in a note of September 6, for the same reasons of prestige that they have recommended the establishment of a reserve of the Comando Superiore, it is considered that it is appropriate to join the proposed Gen. Rommel. Otherwise the Italian Comando Superiore would be reduced to Civil Government functions of Libya.

But besides that it wished to underline the importance of the availability of a large unit in Ajdabiya. It was, in fact, an unusual enemy reconnaissance activities along the tracks Giarabub-Gialo-Agedabi and Tazerbo-Marada-el Agheila. The threat itself did not appear to worry, consider any forces that could be used on those routes, but could be very serious for the whole array of Cyrenaica if done in conjunction with a landing in force in Bengasino.

It was the convenience of organizing Ajdabiya firmly, as, moreover, already provided for by the directives of 4 August, with the aim of benefiting from them which shunting the pivot for the mobile forces intended for

to thwart any attempts to bypass outreach. The telegram which envisaged such a hypothesis-Cavallero rather moot-closed with the request *to know what has been accomplished as you intend to do and to organize Ajdabiya*" ⁽⁷⁵⁾. Of course Bastico replied harshly that forces and means available in Libya were known and that there was no thinking to create a strong defensive structure at Ajdabiya. It was, however, been studied the Organization of the entire zone Ajdabiya-Gialo-Marada-l Agheila, with the formation of small devices, fixed and mobile, capable of carrying out a routine patrol and identify quickly and trim down any opposing points. It was, however, a measure of non-notable entities: exceed, in total, the force could not overcome the two-three companies reinforced by anti-tank weapons.

On 9 September Cavallero decided to summon Gambara to Rome, but before I was able to complete the picture. The afternoon of the 11th presented to the Comando Supremo, had von Rintelen, which mentioned a German impressions about a forthcoming British attempt to unlock Tobruk and supported the request for reinforcements sent by Bastico and Rommel. "I told Keitel-remembered Cavallero-that attack on Tobruk is the idea of the Duce for long time. To what date can we have the possibility of an attack? You must first go to the bottom of the real problem." Which problem came down to a question of transport. About von Rintelen advanced the idea of improving terrestrial ones to Libya extending the railway Barce -Benghazi: the Germans were willing to help with their media ⁽⁷⁶⁾. Then it was the turn of Gen. Gause. The 13th Cavallero gathered the chiefs and sub-chiefs of the general staff of the three armed forces, saying that the Chief of staff's *Panzergruppe* had come to Rome to consider the opportunity to renew the attack on Tobruk in late October and to insist on the *doubling* of overseas transport. Adm. Sansonetti intervened, stating that Gause translated into 20,000 men, 3,300 vehicles and 84,000 tons of materials, requests that had not able to fulfill: you could just "stretch" to send Northern Africa as much as possible. Two days later it was the turn of Gambara, who argued the need for the other two divisions. When Cavallero pointed out that in August, in talks of Cyrene, it was decided to use part of the mobile forces and therefore a single Division in addition to the *Piave*

motorized, because the *Littorio*, armored, was not ready-seemed sufficient, Gambara replied, "*nothing to do*". Then Cavallero decided to hasten the preparation and sending of the *Littorio*. Ultimately, the September 15 meeting between Cavallero, Roatta and Gambara led her to conclude that in the circumstances the capture of Tobruk appeared essential to the subsequent advance towards the Nile and therefore required to address every effort at completion of preparation by October or, at most, early November. In this order of ideas was prepared a program of transport and naval and aerial escort, which were considered essential the protection of convoys to Benghazi by X *Fliegerkorps* (already granted) and the provision by the four German steamers (almost certain).

But there was also another point to solve in any way: the command organization Africa:

“Organization of the command. The capture of Tobruk - noted Cavallero - he would facilitate but Mr. Roatta says that feels very hard. I agree but I do mind that the Germans have their responsibility and not take it lightly. Mr. Gambara is not my opinion: if it goes bad unload on us and if it's okay is their merit. Italian command presides over the Organization but there are difficulties to give orders to Rommel. Mr. Gambara adds that if a part of the aviation acts in the Rommel sector, it ends up being to his command.

Prospectus of two fields on front of Tobruk, one Rommel and one Gambara, with prominence of Gambara in the two sectors. — that is to give up units with the reserve that is Italian. To clarify, in my opinion, is that the separation into two sectors (...).”⁽⁷⁷⁾.

While in Rome he was arguing, in Africa was underway operation *Sommernachtstraum* (a Midsummer night's dream)⁽⁷⁸⁾. In an interview on 4 September between Gambara and Gause were concerned with the general lines of local action to be taken by surprise. Approved by Bastico, it was supposed to take place around the middle of that month: on the character of a coup de main on a big English deposit found in the area of Bir el-Chreigat. The execution was carried out in the initial thought, a German armored and Italian motorized units. Preparations began on September 7 and the *Luftwaffe* began to carry out a meticulous program of aerial and photographic reconnaissance. However, in the next week came from various sources the insistent reporting a likely British offensive was imminent. Maybe that is also why the coup was to be transformed into a genuine force action entrusted to 21st *Panzerdivision*, with

the purpose of "*push security troops advancing on the enemy off the front, over Bir el-Chretgat, and to see if the enemy had made preparations for an offensive.*" The operation, which is now for the vastness of the installation and to go beyond the development dimensions more than just a reconnaissance in force, had to be supported by the aviation on the basis of direct agreements between the command of composition and terminology, the *Fliegerfuhrer* and command of the 5th Air Fleet. The attack also needed to be accompanied by a demonstration in the coastal sector commitment (sketch No. 33).

On 11th and the 12th September and were organized numerous routes to make smooth and expeditious movement of armored columns from the location to that collection, established at the rear of the advanced stronghold. All the tracks were marked with empty gasoline drums; the main route, from the Halfaya, Musaid had been lit at night on 14 through louvers practiced in stems, not visible on the side of the enemy. The training was divided in three columns for the common goal of Dar el-Hamra. The left column (main), formed by 5th *Panzerregiment* reinforced, moving along the edge of the Halfaya until Alam Battuna to continue directly to Dar el-Hamra. The right column, constituted by the 33rd recon group of the 21st *Panzerdivision* reinforced, must develop an enveloping movement passing South of Sidi Omar and reaching then Bir el-Hamra. The center column, consisting of a *Panzerjäger* company, a battery and a sixty empty trucks had the task of linking and material recovery of prey and must proceed along Sidi Suleiman-Dar el Hamra. Meanwhile the *z.b. v. Afrika* Division, supported by two groups of the 2nd rapid artillery deployed on Halfaya, would work in the coastal strip.

At dawn of the 13th three columns were attested respectively North of Halfaya-Musaid, of Sidi Omar and the cornerstone of hill 207, with a large column of essential supplies to the North of fort Campbell. The majority of the tanks had maintained their march on special trailers. At the first lights of the day left columns starting bases without encountering any trace of the enemy initially. Only towards 08:00, at Qaret er-Rueibat (on the trail of Dar el-Hamra), the middle column had a small action with elements of the 11th Hussars, who, after some Exchange of volleys of automatic weapons, quickly withdrew. At 10:00 the three columns are joined on the objective. It was clear that the enemy

have to pull back advanced units for make fall in the vacant point. German movements were reported by British aerial reconnaissance from the previous afternoon. 07:00 of 14 September to the British advanced grouping, had confirmation from its exploring of the action in progress, had issued formal order *Bathchair* for the entry into force of the ready planned withdrawal, structured plan in stages to be implemented progressively, depending on developments, and afterwards at the branch of conventional words. So, at 12:30 was announced the implementation of *Victoria* to perform at the proper time.

Rommel had ended up personally directing the operation, moving, however, for his own account ⁽⁷⁹⁾. For a few hours everything stopped waiting for the supply of armored vehicles and information on the enemy. During this period, namely at 12:55, came a raid of bombers of the South African Air Force blew two fuel tanks, caused some loss and struck the same car of Rommel. They had come to know, the enemy was deployed with the bulk of 7 Armored Division South of Bir at Sofafi, covered by a system of elements of the 11th Hussars, divided into three groups, respectively at Alam es-Safa, Deir Abu Gallaq and hill 209 (about six kilometers south of Deir to bu Gallaq) ⁽⁸⁰⁾. In order to provoke a further retreat of the British advanced positions, Rommel ordered him to stick with the bulk of the positions of Alam es-Safa and develop at the same time mentioning the demonstrative action core bypass hill 209. The action was to start at 15:00 and end in the evening, to allow teams to get back to the basics with the favor of the night.

At 17:00 the bulk of British forces was in the area of Bir Thalata with Bir Habata. In front of the German move, the British group stationed himself further eastward, leaving the 22nd Guards Brigade to cover the coastline, especially at outlets of the Ridge, to confront any bets northward on Bug Bug, through at Sofafi and Sabil. Also needed to occupy the junctions and preside over pits, destroying if withdrawn. Any resistance in place was due south of Marsa Matruh by the 7th Armored Division, southern flank covered by advanced group. So even this attempt of 21st *Panzerdivision*

fell into the void, while the demo action is resolved into simple clashes by patrols and artillery duels. He was however captured half of the 4th South African armored car Regiment with some important documents ⁽⁸¹⁾.

The return of the columns are made in echelons in the nights on the 15 and 16 under the patronage of the 33rd Recon group, followed with poor decision by exploring opponents. The 16th the enemy returned on the initial positions. The operation was essentially allowed to recognize the absence of offensive opponents announced features. Materially hadn't got any loot because the enemy had got to withdraw camp deposits, which could be substantial. On the other hand, fuel consumption for the Germans had been heavy, confirming once again the need to accompany any act with adequate provision of logistic nature, such as to ensure the implementation of the entire operation. Rommel was very brief in reporting to Comando Superiore development and results of *Sommeroachtstraum* and ended the brief letter with short appreciations:

“1) opposing forces located in the area west of Marsa Matruh are weaker than previously had supposed;

2) reconnaissance was unable to see in the area beyond the boundary any deposit or other preparations for an imminent attack;

3) examination of captured documents, very important, probably will provide useful information to learn about the deployment of forces in the Near and Middle East.

It remains therefore confirmed that enemy forces are currently stationed in the Western desert are not sufficient to carry out an offensive. ⁽⁸²⁾.

The latter appreciation, which gave it a valuation substantially optimistic, exerted a strong influence on future operational guidelines of Rommel, strengthening it in the belief of being able to win again, albeit measured, the race time for achieving dominance over the enemy.

An examination of the captured documents were remarkable results items on the opponent. *The Western Desert Force* was the only at the frontier the 4th Indian Division, divided into an advanced grouping on the plateau, a grouping of OASIS (7th Indian Brigade reinforced) further South, the 11th Indian Brigade between the ridge of Salum and Sidi Barrani. The first was formed

by the 22nd Guards Brigade, by the 4th South African armored car Regiment and smaller units. To the rear were: the 7th Armored Division at Marsa Matruh; the 1st and 2nd South African division between ed-Daba, el Alamein and Bug el-Arab; the 50th British Division in an unspecified location; supports and services of Corps at Marsa Matruh, where was also the Commander of the *Western Desert Force*. At Tobruk, the 18th Australian Brigade was replaced by a Polish Brigade and minor units. This picture from the Info Service. Not departed much from reality. It concluded that the enemy had returned the original concept for the defense of Western desert: gradual withdrawal of ground forces with generous aviation support to wear down the axis forces under the entrenched camp of Marsa Matruh, where he was expected to conduct a battle of arrest with armor. The developments of this battle the British Command would stretch reason to set up a possible counteroffensive, or fall back on the Delta, for whose defense seemed to be maintained and consolidated the Amiriya -Natrun-Fayam line. Therein the investigation documents unearthed departed much from reality.

We must now open a parenthesis. In support of the *Fliegerführer Afrika Sommernachtstraum* had organized an air raid with Italians and Germans Ju. 87, escorted by German fighters. For some problems, the Italian 209th squadriglia Ju. 87 failed to tag along to training and, devoid of the Commander (who, himself, had reached the German *Stuka* and continued with them) and unescorted by fighters conducted on to the objective: a concentration of vehicles in the area of Bir Habata. The enemy reaction and the disorientation of the desert, which led to fuel exhaustion, meant that not one of the 10 aircraft returning to base ⁽⁸³⁾. The episode was limited, but it added to a series of “blunt dissection” not only with *Fliegerführer* but first with Rommel, who had already bitterly complained to the Comando Supremo for Italian aircraft attack made by mistake on German vehicles. On 12 September he addressed to Gen. Aimone-Cat, pointing out that losses of ships delivering German material had become unbearable, “*warning-Are added-that these losses can be almost entirely prevented by a suitable air escort*” and, having shown the need that each incoming steamship was seared by two aircraft for a radius of 100 kilometers before entering port, concluded:

“With reference to our verbal agreements of August 19, 1941 please V.E. join command ordered proposals *Panzergruppe Afrika*, by providing that the security service designed by aircraft is hired by units from you employees.

I especially that these provisions were given with the greatest possible promptness. ⁽⁸⁴⁾.

Aimone-Cat is documented very carefully on the issue, gathering data and comparing orders, then answered in detail and concluded by expressing the hope that the time it takes to get able to exhaustively expose things were useful to give Rommel full aware of the problem of protection of convoys and the certainty that the 5th Air Fleet was the most compatible with the means available and without forgetting, among other things, “that the maritime and air enemy we face, has good facilities and be able to do well, also, his war” ⁽⁸⁵⁾. Rommel reiterated the remark and dwelt on this last sentence: “*the conclusion that arises, it will be difficult to do more and better than what has been done so far, indicates a renunciation which I cannot support.*” In any case, calling on the Commander of the 5th Air Fleet Gambut for verbal agreement on the protection of convoys ⁽⁸⁶⁾. New replica of Aimone-Cat: he had not intended to express any renunciation, but rather formulate “*a reminder of the fact that you refuse to see, making it more than likely the aircraft and maritime issues, people's competence, as I would certainly not for terrestrial problems of your competence and, more importantly, as they would allow to anyone else not to do in regards of your media and your business*”. Then held to specify three things: despite having previously expressed to the liaison officer's intention to confer with Gen. Rommel, the letter of these required now to give the interview, can exclude that stemmed positive elements for the solution of the problem; the collaboration for the aerial support on the fronts of Tobruk and Sollum

“it is already for a long time, for my proposal and on order of the Italian-German Authority, the competence of *Fliegerführer Afrika*, which the East sector Command [Gen. Da Barberino] will allow the use of all aircraft means employed, according to Supercomando's orders, the importance of operations, *Fliegerführere* requests my employment directives (...). For this collaboration, so You don't have to agree with *Fliegerführer Afrika*.

Finally, both the composition and terminology as Commander the Commander of the 5th Air Fleet depended directly from the Commander

higher, which should go for Rommel proposals, solicitation of orders, requests for collaboration ⁽⁸⁷⁾. Of course, Rommel not dropped his speech and a last letter returned to assert their right to speak on the *vexata quaestio* and informed him that his first sheet of 12 September was he sent copies to appropriate knowledge, Comando Superiore and that Bastico "*made me know that agreed with what I exposed and with my requests and had forwarded to the Army Comando Supremo translation of my letter Emphasizing also, as a sign of membership, a certain points of own punch*". Among other things, had been asked for a visit by Gen. Pricolo for personal agreements about the problems of North Africa. "*Therefore the desired service hierarchical way by v. e. was followed*" Then, after disputed point by point comments Aimone-Cat, Rommel ended:

"I learned with regret that V.E. broke, with regard to the service, those with direct me which constituted the premise for a fruitful collaboration in the interest of a common victory. However, I too am of the opinion that a profitable collaboration with V.E. will no longer be possible. As regards the further wish to represent, I am only using Commands of superiors and my prayer retreat about a personal interview. I pray that he would refrain from a further exchange of correspondence on this topic" ⁽⁸⁸⁾.

Folded things to that point, it became virtually impossible to open and frank cooperation, not least because-this term had objectively-for Rommel his meaning: amounted to allocation of forces and means. As regarded their orders as *Fliegerführer* more or less, and without even much shape, look after intended to employ the 5th Air Fleet ⁽⁸⁹⁾.

Meanwhile, unfortunately he had submitted another controversy. On 21 September the Division *Luftgaustab z.b. V. Afrika* wrote directly in command of the 5th Air Fleet complaining three cases of German planes attacked and hit by Italian fighters, commenting that the incidents could have been avoided if the Italian pilots had observed "*a more thoughtful demeanor*" and praying to impart appropriate measures to prevent the recurrence of such incidents "*and also to prevent possible measures of self-defense by German aircraft attacked to cause even greater losses*". To which Aimone-Cat responded curtly to the form, unacceptable, especially as used against a top-level Command, both to the substance: a device had been

hit by ant-aircraft artillery and another German investigation had recognized and admitted a manifest infringement of the rules on over flights. And ended up inviting the *Luftgaustab* to inquire about what had happened in the ports of Libya; so you would have realized the need to strictly enforce flight rules valid for all planes, Italians or Germans who they were.

Is meant well: such incidents were overcome, not least because certain not rare in war error of either – in fact of examples there is an embarrassment of choice-though the random connection emphasized the gravity of the confrontation between 5th Air Fleet Command and German commands. What's more, the 5th Air Fleet had long been seriously at odds with the Comando Superiore that essentially accused him of poor knowledge of aviation, little things rational use of aviation, arbitrary handling of air issues directly with German commands and unjustified remarks on the work of the air force. Inevitably, on 26 September Bastico demanded the replacement of Gen. Aimone-Cat with the Gen. Vittorio Marchesi and Cavallero decided that replacing would have taken place in the occasion of the inspection of Pricolo of Libya, scheduled for the first week of October ⁽⁹⁰⁾.

The design to take Tobruk was rapidly assuming the boundaries defined, while continue to give hand to the work of strengthening and accommodation of the siege. In this regard, since the summer had been given appropriate directives, but it must be said that even on the subject of field fortification training of managers, which was the direction of the work, left something to be desired. In mid-September on Gen. Navarini had expressed to three divisions of the XXI Corps his regret at having to return to live on the topic “*since, recently, I had to personally say that we're not on an organic and rational plan of work*”: linear paths instead of winding movement, zigzag, or city's bastioned rack to allow flanking converging or pulls; stalking for shallow automatic weapons, too large and profiles in relief; bad masking; the absence of static structures for second-Echelon battalions; shortage of shelters for personnel; small caliber batteries and not accommodated Commands in strong points ⁽⁹¹⁾.

On the other hand also Rommel, who rightly attached large importance to an efficient exploitation of the land by

field work, not neglected inspection and less even grudging the remark. Besides obvious tactical reasons and personal security, over time another clue was apparent. To conquer the stronghold it was necessary to first think through the no man's land: a strip of land whose depths ranged from a couple to about ten kilometers, according to the irregular take on the front of the siege at the end of several attempts to attack. It was not simple affair, and Rommel, devised a *ad hoc* technique, ordered an intense training cycle. For several consecutive nights of each stronghold garrison, reinforced by "bearers" and by sappers, had to fall back leaving in place a number of weapons with its munitions and replenish, approximately one kilometer on the reverse of the position, a new stronghold, complete with locations, shelters and minefield. This training aimed to understand the whole operation in a few hours of rapid movement and hectic work. In the night on October 11, almost all the encirclement moved forward in many stretches for seven or eight miles-under the protection of armored units, leading happily to port the preliminary act.

Meanwhile were made some variations to the Italian-German deployment. At the border, the *Savona* ⁽⁹²⁾ stopper towards South on structures from hill 207 (approximately eight kilometers south of Bir Musaid) at Sidi Omar, and a part of the *z.b. V. Afrika* Division focused on Halfaya positions- Sollum. Bardia was manned by Italian troops. Even large units of the Corps to maneuver had moved from the *gebel*: the *Ariete* at Bir Hakeim and *Trieste* at Gadd el-Ahmar (South-East of Gazala). The news of the enemy's safe until September, began to be uncertain not having yet found the unit that looked like they had replaced the 9th Australian Division (chart on next page).

The 13, early in the afternoon, Rommel summoned to Gambut Gen. Navarini and Gen. Boettcher, Commander of the *Panzergruppe* artillery's, and began to lay down the basic elements of the operation: to employ force, direction of attack, phases of action. The mass collision, divided into two blocks of orders respectively Navarini (*Pavia* Inf. Div. and *Bologna* Inf. Div.), and Crüwell (15th *Panzer* and part of the *z.b.V. Afrika*), had to advance astride Suesi junction -Sidi Mahmudpotto junction of Tobruk. The junction was to be achieved within the next 12 Days, the harbor in the evening. You abandoned the previous draft maneuver that addressed the main effort from Ras

SITUATION OF THE BRITISH FORCES IN TOBRUK	
According to S.I.M (first week of October)	actually (third week of October)
command 9 th Australian Inf. Div.	Command 70 th British Inf. Div.
The western sector (up to Bir el-Medduar)	
26 th Australian Brigade 18 th Lancers of the 3 rd Indian Brigade an unspecified battalion	14 th Infantry Brigade <i>I Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire</i> <i>II York and Lancaster</i> 14 th anti-tank co. 2/15 th Australian bn.
Central sector (up to including the road to el Adem)	
Polish Brigade with three battalions one squadron cav. – without transports two anti-tank companies one machine-gun company	1 st Polish Brigade with four bns. 1 st <i>Royal Northumberland Fusiliers</i> minor units.
Southern sector (up to the sea):	
16 th British Brigade <i>II Queen's Royal Regiment</i> <i>II King's Own Regiment</i> <i>II Leicestershire Regiment</i> one anti-tank company	16 th Infantry Brigade <i>II Queen's Royal Regiment</i> <i>II King's Own Royal Regiment</i> <i>II Leicestershire Regiment</i> 16 th anti-tank co. 2/13 th Australian Bn.
At the Center and in the reserve:	
20 th Australian Brigade 2/32 nd Bn. of the 25 th Brigade an unspecified battalion <i>Royal Tank Regiment</i> unspecified elements	23rd Infantry Brigade <i>I Essex Regiment</i> <i>I Durham Light Infantry</i> <i>IV Border Regiment</i> 23rd anti-tank co. 32 nd tank Brigade (training): <i>1st Royal Tank</i> <i>4th Royal Tank</i> <i>7th Royal Tank</i> minor unit

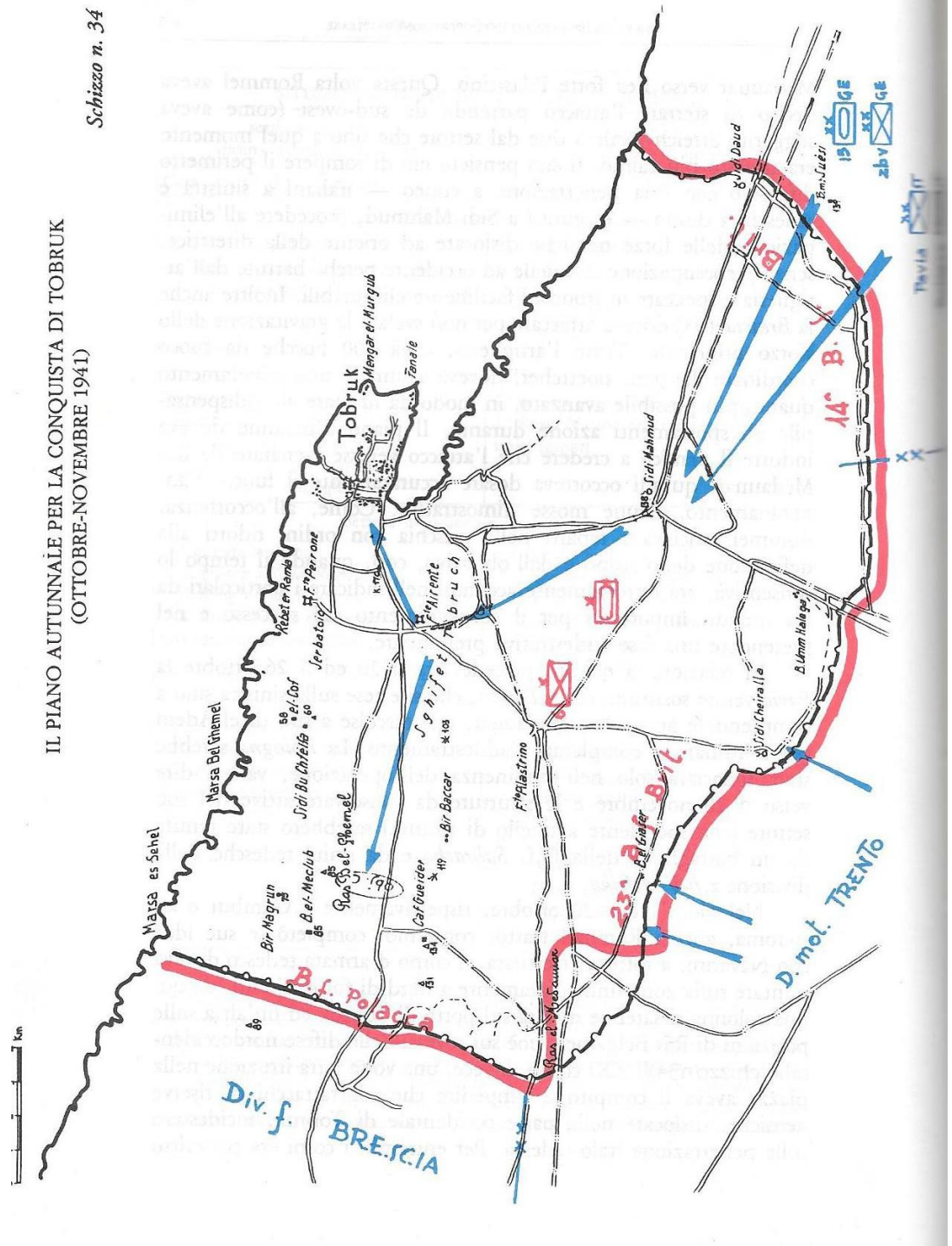
Note: the situation of the S.I.M. refers to the resulting data at the end of September, but takes into account established the replacement of the 24th Australia Brigade in with the 16th British Brigade. From Italian side also believed the remaining brigades of the 8th Australian Division were getting the change, but did not know by which units.

In fact, between 13 and 25 October the British 70th Infantry Division (which to end of 10 October was named 6th Infantry Division) was almost totally replaced the 9th Australian, some elements of which remained for a few weeks yet.)

Medauuar to the former Fort post. This time Rommel had decided to launch the attack from the Southwest (as Streich suggested), namely from a sector that until then had remained calmer. His thought was to break the defensive perimeter with a wedge penetration-Italians on the left and Germans on the right-and, at Sidi Mahmud, proceed to the elimination of enemy forces stationed east of the direction without concern of those in the West because beaten by artillery and broken into sections easily disposable. Also the *Brescia* ⁽⁹³⁾ was to attack not to unravel the gravitation main effort. All the artillery, about 500 cannons to coordinate fire since Gen. Boettcher, had to take a advanced deployment as much as possible, so that the necessary action during shifts. The deception plan was to induce the enemy to believe that the attack was carried out by Ras Medauuar, then it was necessary to accurately measure the fire, clouding, certain demonstrative moves. How, if at all, Rommel launched the units into the fray with reduced orders to define the purpose and the goal, so when the weather allowed, was extremely accurate in indicating the details he deemed important for achieving success and claim a preliminary training phase.

In connection with the foregoing, between 20 and 26 October the *Pavia* was replaced by the *Trento*, which expanded on the left to include Ras Medauuar, and gathered South of el-Adem to settle out and complete the training. The *Bologna* was dropped only in the run-up to the operation, namely towards the November 20 and keep facilities operating in its field (which corresponds to that of rupture) were held by a battalion of the *Sabratha* Inf. Div. and German units of the *z.b. V. Afrika* Division.

On the 16th and 20 October respectively at Gambut and Acroma, again Rommel was confirmed, completed his ideas with Navarini: at breech made, the German Corps was to focus on the area just north of Fort Airenti, hence a column would move on Tobruk Harbor and another on the positions of Ras Belgamel, i.e. on reverse of the Northwestern defenses (sketch # 34) The XXI Corps Instead, once made irruption in the fort had the responsibility to prevent retaliations of enemy reserves, located in the West of Tobruk, unaffected by the Italian-German penetration. For both bodies was required



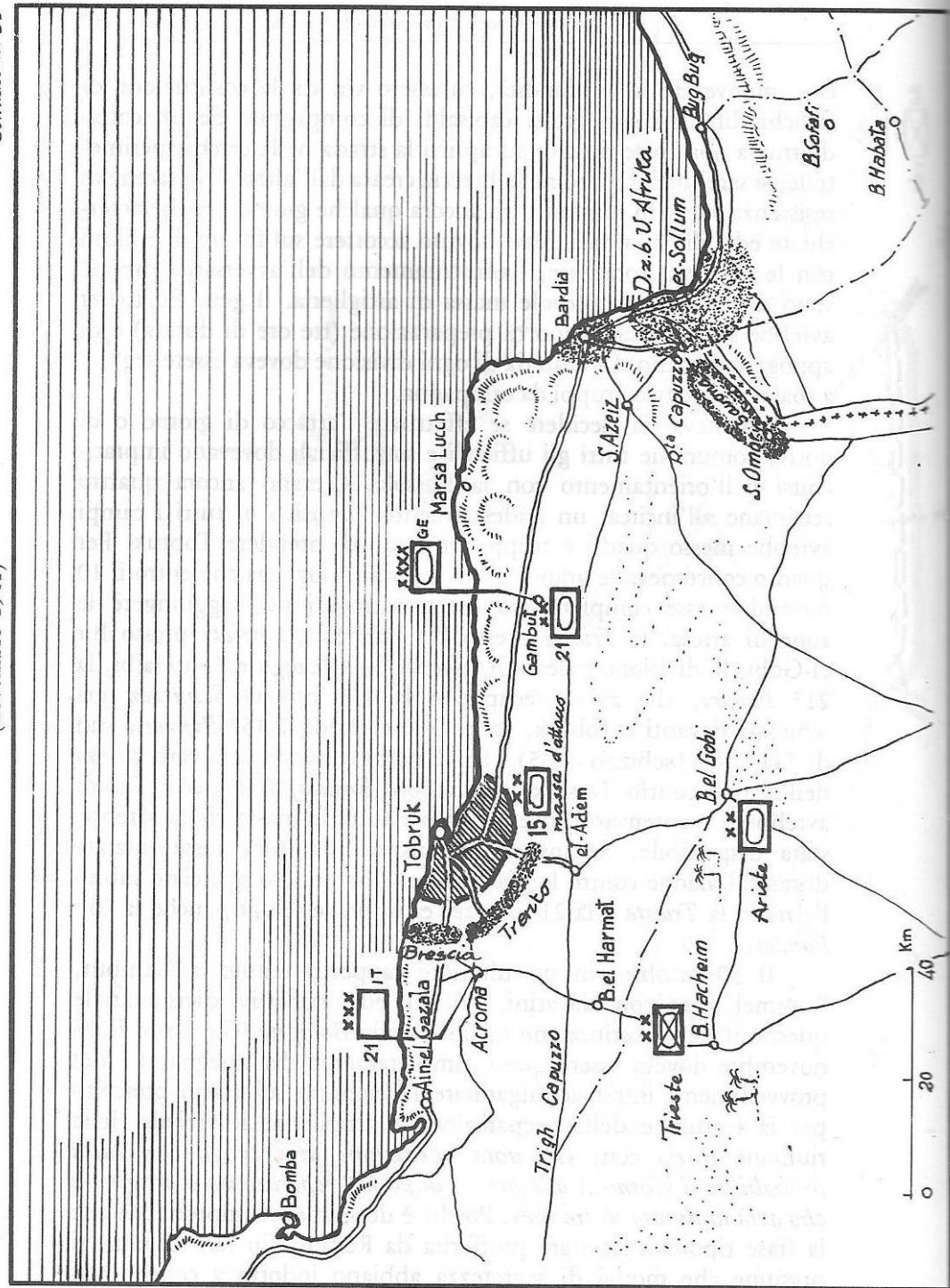
that, moving in depth, constitution taking gradually setting up defensive sides with large cornerstones of the enterprise. If a corps had not managed to fight their way into perimeter circle, it would be sent into the breach created by the other. Where pockets of resistance had striven for another few days though surrounded and he, Rommel, was due there on the Sollum front with armored divisions, the annihilation of the opponent would be donated to the considerable mass of artillery. Gen. Boettcher, studied a plan of preparation (three hours) and unit support. Each Infantry Division had to be followed to sudden changes from four groups of campaign.

Remained to be decided whether to attack by day or night, all officers and non-commissioned officers were to be expert with the compass orientation. There were still about four weeks: intensive training in all fields would put management and troops able to take Tobruk. As concerned the large mobile units, it was necessary to that by November 10 they complete movements for waiting areas: the *Trieste* at Bir Hakeim, the *Ariete* at Bir el Gobi, German *Afrika* division between Sidi Rezegh and Sidi Haibi, the 21st *Panzer*, which had recovered the 15th Schützen Brigade already deployed at Tobruk, Gasr el Arid to the 15th *Panzer* South from Gambut (sketch No. 35). If the enemy had attacked before the action against Tobruk, the divisions *Brescia*, *Bologna* and *Trento*, would have maintained the investment and all the mass cited would be available. If the British offensive was begun during action against the stronghold, they immediately uncouple the *Ariete*, the *Trieste* and the 21st *Panzer* and, in a short time, even the 15th *Panzer*.

On 30 October, in a further report to Gambut, Rommel struck with Navarini, Crüwell Divisional and their replacement issues online of *Bologna* (which by November 18 had to be almost completely disengaged) and of measures designed to fool the opponent on the chosen one for breaking and artillery preparation. The minutes of the meeting begins with: "*the operation will take place in all probability the day ... at the ..., after the artillery preparation that will last three hours.*" Since it is very unlikely that the following phrase was said by Rommel in such terms, it is assumed that privacy reasons have led to cover with ellipsis orientation date and time.

PREVISTA DISLOCAZIONE DELLE TRUPPE
PER L'ATTACCO A TOBRUK
(novembre 1941)

Schizzo n. 35



This fervor of predispositions, which had led to a noticeable pleased troops in excitement at the prospect of finally putting an end to the siege, gnawing a comment: "*the preparations for the attack on Tobruk asked again for goodwill and cooperation on the part of all policies, and gregarious. There was something wrong, a device that does not engage, an organization that wasn't working*" ⁽⁹⁴⁾. Perhaps the causes of this «illness»- that however concerned only higher level commands-resided in two precise facts: the obvious intention of Rommel to conduct operations as appropriate and seemed to him a substantial Italian indecision, departing from Rome, between attack Tobruk or prepare for the English offensive. On morale Bastico referred to Cavallero, who had asked for clarification on the orders of Mussolini, concerned by reports of the P.A.I. showing symptoms of depression in the units ⁽⁹⁵⁾. In his letter the superior Commander stated that because it was in the concrete possibility of different levels was implemented in Africa to improve sanitation, and moral power of the soldier. It was also explained by persuasion aimed at understanding how, in specific conditions of Libya, licensing issues and changes – those on which most complaints on account – were not of a very special nature, which sadly forced to dilute the implementation over time.

Bastico ensured that the morale was high and that could appear as censored letters "*I only mirrored the mood of some individual tired or special cases, which have nothing to do with mass sentiment.*" This was not entirely true, but probably it was bureaucratic tendency that has arisen to introduce a State of "*faith and increasing security*" ⁽⁹⁶⁾. In fact, the commanders of large units had little or nothing to be ashamed of. Certainly there were deficiencies in the command action of certain commanders of units, deploying what, especially considering the strong number of officers called up, however the unrest-real- was caused by two fundamental reasons: the non-granting of licenses (leave) and the promised changes and announced with great advertising and the impossibility of rotation to the divisions in line.

The alternation (30 days license and return to the Centre of mobilization) was provided to those that had reached two years spent in Africa; permanent service officers, the

non-commissioned officers and the military career of reenlisted ranks would have enjoyed only if allowed by service requirements. The special license (30 days plus travel) was granted after one year's overseas presence. There were indications about precedence to be given or constraints must be observed. After the great enthusiasm raised by advertised concession was a general discontent took to note the limited implementation of the measures. The fact is that a much more prudent and sensible personnel management would not have led to a similar state of affairs; now the appropriate Ministerial provision could not be affected by the difficulties of the situation locally. As from the first of September, Bastico was to represent to the Supreme Command, the amount of troops was absolutely inadequate operational needs and three-quarters of them were engaged in Cyrenaica in sectors already too extensive. So it became impossible to apply in full the much proclaimed change until he began the arrival of additional units. Had gained title to the 500 official repatriation, 1,300 NCO's and men of 9,000, to which the troop 1st October would have added another 180 officers, 1,750 NCO's and 2,500 troop. For four or five months would have on average gained 70 officers and a thousand between NCOs and ranks. In addition, there were 3,000 men to dismiss as belonging to the 1903 and earlier classes. For all these people the problem is translated, as mentioned above, only the arrival of complementary items, jackets for the return they received steamers back in Italy. For licensing, on the other hand, the speech changed because it was necessary to consider the return to Africa and, consequently, would have imposed an Italy-Libya movement of more than 3,000 men per month.

By censorship came information about the mood of the troops in Cyrenaica:

“(...) Worthy of particular attention are the moral conditions of the divisions *Bologna, Brescia, Pavia*, and more particularly of the infantry divisions of the above units. Moral depression and fatigue are detected indirectly diffused from the general tone of their writings: complaints because they still had no rest or return, expressions of longing for the license, so excited that solicits the submission of required documents. The privations, hardships, the hardships that soldiers must support are described so forcibly resigned from denote no enthusiasm and evident fatigue. This situation is not limited solely to the ranks, but is also evident in some officers; These reveal lack of enthusiasm and are directly or indirectly the desire to leave this front.

Is this indeed a wish almost General for those who have two or more years of tenure in the colony: feel the need to leave Africa and see through licensing, in repatriation but also finally in a decisive battle that leads to fixed destinations (...) ⁽⁹⁷⁾,

And the police of XXI Corps pointed out that *“In many units, especially among those in line, there is little percentage of permanent service officers, whereby this fact while producing significant repercussions on the morale of the soldier, which sometimes has the feeling of not being well controlled and guided, gives rise to unfavorable comments and by complement) officers”* ⁽⁹⁸⁾.

On October 3 the Office of the Supreme command operations summarized reports of forces in Northern Africa:

Italian-German forces	British forces
<p>a) Land</p> <p>Cyrenaica: (including Tobruk) 4 Inf. Div., 2 Mot. Div, 3 Arm. Div.</p> <p>Tripolitania: 1 Inf. Div. and various units</p> <p>Sahara: rep. various (5000 men).</p> <p>Overall: 7 Inf. Div. (of which 2 Mot.) and 3 Arm. Div a whole of 200 thousand men with approximately 500 tanks (including 200 light).</p> <p>b) aerial</p> <p>570 aircraft (120 Germans) of which 2/3: efficient</p> <p>280 fighter (40 Germans)</p> <p>190 bombers (German 80)</p> <p>100 other specialties</p>	<p>a) Land</p> <p>Tobruk: forces equivalent to 2 Inf. Div.,</p> <p>Western Desert: 4 Inf. Div., 1 Arm. Div., various Armored units.</p> <p>Delta: 5 Inf. Div. (+ 1 presumed), 1 Arm Div, +Various Armored units</p> <p>Overall: 11 or 12 Inf. Div. (largely motorized) and 3 Arm Div, for a total of 220 thousand men. with about 1200 armored vehicles (of which 1100 in the Arm. units, 100 of the divisional exploring groups), in addition to 800 <i>Bren carriers</i> in the infantry units.</p> <p>b) aerial</p> <p>1100 aircraft (not counting those on the carrier):</p> <p>500 fighters,</p> <p>350-400 bombers</p> <p>200-250 other specialties</p>

"Given the need for an enemy to preside over the Delta-said the Office-the opposing infantry are equivalent.

The superiority of the enemy in armored vehicles: the numerical comparison is however mitigated by the fact that the data provided by S.I.M. are based on «organic» identified units that will be

number and the fact that a large proportion of British armored vehicles consists of light tanks were discovered. At a glance: our armored units less numerous, more solid; British armored vehicles and more numerous, more mobile, more broadly distributed to infantry. In the case of opposing offensive its superiority in tanks is also mitigated by the fact that the largest number of tanks is opposed not only the counter-maneuver of our tanks, but also the resistance of the strongholds and anti-tank vehicles, including our divisions and German ones now have a good room amenities.

Undoubted superiority of enemy air forces, rest, seems to have good equipment and logistics, for the moment, not bound by significant commitments in the Delta, while a significant portion (about one third) of our air force is constrained in Tripolitania to the escort of convoys. In summary, in a battle at the front of the East would be opposed about 380 our aircraft and 900 enemies aircraft”.

Comparisons between the opposing forces are sometimes set with subjective criteria. A review based. global data on similar doesn't seem, in fact, very convincing. However, it is clear the defensive concept at the base of the document. And it's still interesting to consider the different assessment of British troops made by Italian and German information services, including that of Rommel (chart on next page).

A couple of weeks later, the Office of the Comando Supremo operations took under consideration the convenience or the capture of Tobruk, always in relation to the power relations mentioned. Without repeating the now well-known pros and cons, the conclusions acknowledged the capture of Tobruk as unquestionable and necessary premise to an offensive in Egypt. This offensive, on the other hand, could certainly not have start before a rate of large enemy units was moved "*to counter the German Roadmap* [from the Caucasus] verse,"*the Canal*", that in turn could not verify, at best, before spring 1942. So the capture of Tobruk was not urgent: it was enough that precede with a fair degree of advanced recovery time, i.e. in January or February. In support of this argument might be valid concerns of logistics nature of the Intendenza Superiore N. A., since in the July-September quarter had arrived in Libya about half of ordinary consumption requirements. Stocks of food supplies were limited to 20-30 days; those ammunition ranged from less than two unfoc to seven-eight unfoc; those of petrol and diesel amounted to respectively 13 and 55 days, ordinary use and obviously not fighting; the aviation fuel

was enough for one action. Everything was too late in October: “*so for the moment the logistics situation A.S.I.-noted the Supreme Command Operations Office in an October 26 memo - is definitely started to worsen rather than improve*”.

EVALUATION OF THE BRITISH FORCES IN EGYPT		
Abwehr (in date 29/8)	Panzergruppe Afrika (in Date 16/9)	S.I.M's (in Date 12/9 in)
large units: Accepted: -9 Inf. Div. -2 Arm. Div. Large units: alleged -2 Inf. Div.	G.U. accepted: -8 Inf. Div. -2 Arm. Div. G.U. alleged: -None	G.U. accepted: -10 Inf. Div. -3 Arm. Div. G.U. alleged: -2 Inf. Div. -1 Arm. Div.
Total: 13 divisions:	Total 10 divisions	Total: 16 divisions
In particular, according to S. I. M.:		
<p>accepted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -7th English Inf. Div. (2) -12th English Inf. Div. -23rd English Inf. Div. -2nd New Zealand Inf. Div. (1) -4th Indian Inf. Div. (1) -? Indian Inf. Div. (4) -7th Australian Inf. Div. -9th Australian Inf. Div. (1) -1st South Africa Inf. Div. (1) -? unknown Inf. Div. -2nd English Arm. Div. (3) -7th English Arm. Div. (1) -unit. New Zealand Arm. Bd. -unit. South Africa Arm. Bd.(5) <p>alleged:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -49th English Inf. Div. -2nd South Africa Inf. Div. (1) -10th English Arm. Div. 		
<p>(1) Divisions actually in Egypt. (2) these were the 6th (later 70th) Inf. Div. (3) there were the 1st Tank bd. and the 4th and to 1st Arm. Bd. Non-divisional. (4) there were the 16th, 38th and 29th Indian Inf. Bd. (5) there was the 2nd South African Inf. Bd. Non-divisional</p>		

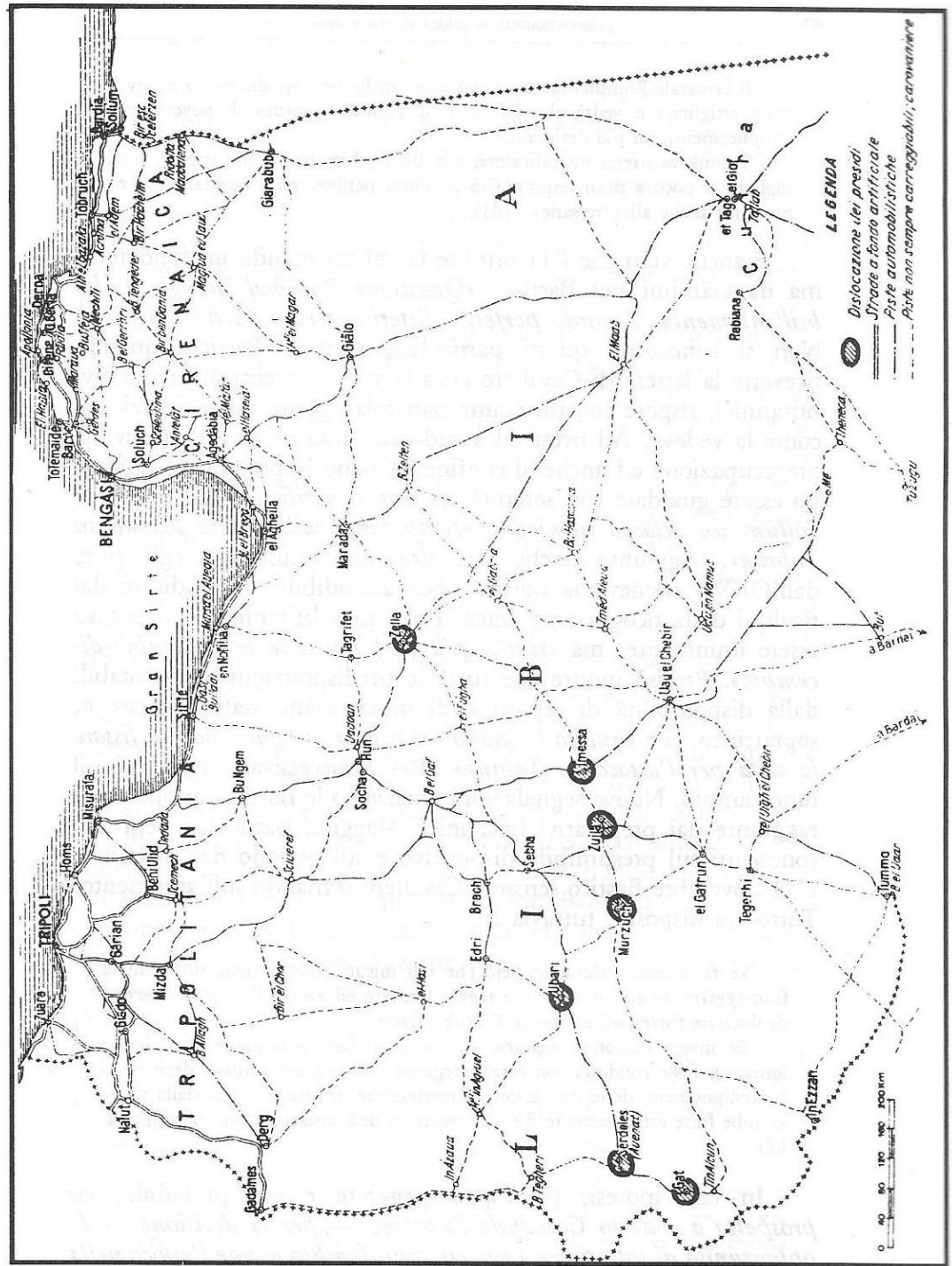
Since mid-October, they more and more frequently clues that required to consider how likely the hypothesis of an enemy offensive, which American officers in Egypt, in commenting on the massive supply of war material-he calculated that by early August had arrived in Egypt from the United States over 2,000 trucks, 500 tanks of 13 tons. and an unknown number, but relevant, of aircraft ⁽⁹⁹⁾-spoke of the grandeur of the preparations made by the army of the Nile. The start of operations seemed to have been planned within the current month, but would be delayed pending a favorable tactics, such as the axis attack on Tobruk. A telegram sent to the *Associated Press* in London from a correspondent in Cairo said: "*the army more powerful than Britain has ever rallied first in Africa is located in the Western desert for the defense of Egypt and for any action against the German-Italian forces in Libya, which forces will be decisive action (...). I am convinced we can predict with confidence that the most terrible battle along the North African coast will be fought between short (...)*" ⁽¹⁰⁰⁾. Cavallero wrote in the October 22, Bastico stressing the possibility that this would take the offensive before the Italian-German attack on Tobruk and inviting to orient themselves to combat it while not losing sight of the preparation for the conquest of the fort. Also considered possible the possibility of a concomitant DeGaullist initiative against South Tripolino ⁽¹⁰¹⁾ (sketch No. 36).

The top commander had just forwarded to Rome a summary of provisions given by Rommel until 20 October, without expressing an opinion ⁽¹⁰²⁾. Though there were frictions and perplexity. A ratio (which does not have an explicit subject of discussion with the German command) was the intention that the command of the artillery attack on Tobruk was taken from Gen. Manca, albeit accompanied by a German General to transmit orders to German artillery. The concerns are well placed in light from a just completed the 5 October from Gambara for Bastico. The first was to go for three or four days by Rommel, to know exactly his thoughts and to explain the Italian point of view. The memo ended with these considerations:

“Gen. Rommel pursues a particular concept and absolutely right; but I see the problem under a different appearance. I, in the current situation, rather than an achievement I have to get in to avoid any failure conditions.

DISLOCAZIONE NEL SAHARA DEI PRESIDI PIÙ INTERNI
(a fine ottobre 1941)

Schizzo n. 36.



General Rommel face well also accounts limited to implementation of artillery and sees that the attack on Tobruk in early November is simply wishful thinking.

Tobruk goes close methodically in an increasingly narrow circle, so remove them little by little breath. This will result in casualties, and it is natural; but it will also produce in your opponent. ⁽¹⁰³⁾

It is also true that the October 11 Gambará sent a phonogram from Gambut for Bastico: *"I resolved Rommel Issue brilliantly. Perfect agreement. Will refer to specific item. (...)"*. You do not know these details, however Bastico, when he received the letter of Cavallero about rumors of British preparations, responded with a detailed examination of the situation, as he saw. West and Southwest there was cause for concern and also the Egyptian border the prospects could be viewed with equanimity *"if not occur on the face of an enemy attack contemporary on the Sollum front to our action on Tobruk"*. He also added that Rommel, aware he also refrained from OKW, believed the news little trusted. Judging by the results of aerial reconnaissance, the British offensive could not be imminent, but *"at most (...) in November-December."* He also stated that all arrangements made possible by the availability of resources and units had been adopted and, in particular, *"that this command reserves anyway to fix the date for the attack on Tobruk"* ⁽¹⁰⁴⁾. Later, however, the tone changed. New reports revealed the considerable proportions reached by British preparations. More details were known about the expected device and on the time of the offensive. On 11 November Bastico wrote to Cavallero back on topic. Everything was prepared, however ...:

"It is easily assessable, however, that these measures are just sufficient to cope with a limited-range enemy action and having the content in order to distract the forces attack on Tobruk (a distraction).

However, if the opposing action on the Sollum front tends to distant targets and was conducted with adequate forces to achieve decisive results, the temporary nature of the two actions with there would a such crisis from which it might be extremely difficult to get into a situation still bearable.

In this case, unfortunately, worse and more likely, *"opens at this Supreme Command-for the decision-the opportunity to undergo new examination the time in which the action may be undertaken for the conquest of*

Tobruk”⁽¹⁰⁵⁾. We cannot of course say that it was a fancy way of downloading responsibilities. This was the moment to exercise in full the right to impose its own decision in that theatre of Operations Commander. The alternative was to leave white paper to a commander of the army that some would not hesitate to take for serious party it was. The put everything back in the hands of the Supreme command, frankly, does not appear acceptable.

From the German side the news were divided. In early October the *Abteilung Fremde Heere West* (=foreign armies West unit.) of OKH had represented an imminent British offensive, which excluded from the *Panzergruppe*’s intelligence service. Moreover, at the end of the month on Gen. Marras telegraphed Berlin: “*no clue that England tries big operation coming soon in Cyrenaica because too busy for a new Middle East. It is impossibile England may try get some successful prestige. Führer worried about Sardinia and Pantelleria (...)*”⁽¹⁰⁶⁾. In the same period foreign armies West unit. Chief of the OKH convened in Athens, among others, the Chief Information Office of the *Panzergruppe*, the German 12th army and the X *Fliegerkorps*. Once claimed to feel very very likely next offensive, but Rommel not convinced, who with this state of mind, absolutely optimistic, he went to Rome for a fortnight. On the morning of November 4 was received, with von Rintelen, by Cavallero and took the opportunity to hatch the situation with confidence. -On the front of Sollum could rest assured: the strong points were solid and the maritime traffic with Bardia did not present difficulties, because the opponent was unable to effectively beat the port with the aerial action. At Tobruk, the *Pavia* was trained very well and people showed enthusiasm. The *Trento* was well armed, with its 150 anti-tank weapons⁽¹⁰⁷⁾. The preparations should be completed before the 15, but the attack was scheduled between November 20 and December 4 in order to take account of the moon. The evening before the day X the *Brescia* would have started an action prior to the diversion:

“Rommel confides-noted Cavallero in his diary-the enemy, which expects from the West and from the South our attack and he deployed his artillery in the Southwest, could be misled by the action of the *Brescia* who will now continue into the morning of the day of the attack (K day). In the morning of day X four divisions will advance to the Southeast towards Tobruk

(two Italian divisions to the left and two German divisions on the right). Commanders respectively Navarrino [= Navarini] and Kruel [= Crüwell]. The action is expected to last 48 hours, after two armored divisions will be back [towards the border] to fend off a possible enemy counteroffensive.

I ask Rommel if possible a wide range enveloping attack by the enemy.

Rommel excludes it because the enemy fears exposing its backline to be cut from Italian and German divisions. Provides only an action with a few negotiable forces using aviation.

Inform Rommel I gave orders to reinforce the air force with 3 groups of fighters and he says he will do so before the action. Finally asserts its full agreement with Mr. Gambarv.”

The same beliefs Rommel expressed in a telephone conversation had in those days with the Gen. Alfred Jodl, Chief of OKW Operations Department. These, which incidentally had the elements too scarce for an exact knowledge of the State of things on the far away cyrenaic theater, expressed hesitation, especially given the superiority of the *Royal Air Force* which would make formidable next British offensive. It was better to postpone the attack on Tobruk in early 1942 and for the moment just make more solid the Egyptian frontier? Rommel responded with energy and supported their views: considered the situation of the transport in the Mediterranean, there was reason to fear that the weather would change the balance of power in favor of the enemy. In any case, the opponent would be detained at the border by the 21st *Panzerdivision* until after the conquest. The 13th new meeting request to the Comando Supremo. The atmosphere was rather tense: the night on 9 November the *Duisburg* convoy (five ships with 35,000 tones of materials and two tankers with 14,000 tones of fuel) was entirely destroyed by Force K, sailing from Malta, despite the escort provided by two cruisers and four destroyers of the Navy's 3rd Division (Adm. Bruno Brivonesi)⁽¹⁰⁸⁾. In spite of the fact that just the day before, Riccardi had presented two projects in Eastern Mediterranean operations⁽¹⁰⁹⁾, hovered a feeling of a powerless maritime. While on 11 November, at a meeting with the under-chief of staff of the three armed forces and senior officers directly involved in the problem, on Gen. Magli summarized:

“You must first see what you can do to ensure life in Libya and not for offensive action, as until this time had thought of doing. So we must give preference to the defensive character of N. A. and particularly to the lives of the men, postponing any offensive action at a time when it will be possible to obtain all necessary means (...)”⁽¹¹⁰⁾.

Cavallero, that same morning asked von Rintelen of “*review with Gen. Rommel whether or not the investment of Tobruk*”⁽¹¹¹⁾. However it was apparent that the difficulties clearly identified in the field of maritime transport while had to be addressed and somehow overcome. In the meeting of the 11th Adm. Sansonetti had said: “*Let's start from this principle: the traffic with Tripoli is suspended until we can create conditions to make the interruption [of Tripolitania] foiled with a tolerable margin of safety*” and meanwhile you could increase traffic with Benghazi, which already had ten ships per month⁽¹¹²⁾. The issue was further discussed under various angles even with the *Kriegsmarine* and representatives of the *Luftwaffe*, so that when, on the morning of the 13th, the two German generals returned to Palazzo Vidoni, there existed the intention to react positively. Von Rintelen said that, after careful evaluation of the situation with Rommel, German thinking was directed towards the conquest of Tobruk and as soon as possible, i.e. by the end of the month. “*I agree wholeheartedly!*” -wrote Cavallero in his diary-*I would add that there should be, however, examine certain aspects of the problem*”. Aspects, or rather the objections proposed by him were removed one by one. Not all the necessary means were in Africa: Rommel argued that those arriving or departing were insufficient. Until we managed to neutralize La Valletta was unable to send convoys to Tripoli: von Rintelen assured him that the three squadrons of Ju. 88 (already expected) would arrive soon. It was necessary to define in detail the load of steamers for Benghazi: Rommel promised to send a detailed memo. Supplies that aroused greater concern covered fuel, ammunition and food: Rommel ensured that they were “*content to such an extent that the action can be done*”. Cavallero then informed have again summoned to Rome for a more complete discussion with Gambara, but before Rommel's observation that there was already an agreement in principle and that they looked just appropriate to contemporary Libyan Theatre absence of *Panzergruppe Afrika*'s Commander and of the Chief of staff of the Comando Superiore -Commander of the Army Corps to maneuver, the telegram was cancelled.

"In summary, imposed the problem-noted Cavallero again-as follows: what can we give and if what we can give, taking into account consumption, see if we can meet, after our action, such an English attack.

Keep in mind that until the end of December we cannot transport to Tripoli. Ourselves we can bring Benghazi 70,000 tons. theoretical, 50,000 tons. in practice, a requirement of 150,000 tons. monthly and at the same time we have to do the action.

I provided from the premise that we have to take Tobruk, but we have to have this picture well before my eyes not only for German troops but also for Italian ones (...)”⁽¹¹³⁾.

I'm not clear I thought nor the attitude of Cavallero. With basic data places it on the table, there was no possibility of reasoning and the negative solution-was forced. However, if the figures quoted were “flexible”, it was decide and, frankly, it seemed that he microeconomic reforms from taking place. Discharged visitors at 11:00 went from Mussolini. The interview had to take away any hesitation. Just got back to Palazzo Vidoni, summoned Riccardi and told him to study with urgent character naval operation to transfer in Tripoli by a convoy of six fast boats ready at Naples, dedicating to its protection must not be less than two naval divisions. Then he reiterated the order with an official letter⁽¹¹⁴⁾ and prepared for Mussolini a note about what you wanted to do to “*make as soon as possible a measure of energy that breaks the hypnotic state in which they rushed, without this reaction, the recent events on the Sea*”⁽¹¹⁵⁾, note that in the evening brought to Palazzo Venezia. As a result, in the afternoon of the next day, another meeting took place with Riccardi, Pricolo, Rommel and von Rintelen to review the possibilities of supply in Libya.

Reading the minutes⁽¹¹⁶⁾ and coming back with my mind to other similar reports, it is undeniable the emergence of an unpleasant sense of dissatisfaction. Rarely there is a clear preliminary exposure by who has gathered all the elements, in order to synthesize possibilities and needs, ask a incontrovertible comparison, consider one or more solutions, suggest-best grounds-that restraint and, after this exposure, a debate designed to test, refine or criticizing certain aspects and finally a decision. More frequently it is the feeling of an examination conducted without the appropriate strategic. While admitting that the incident is to be charged to the typical treatment of those logistical problems in which you want to back up that doesn't add up. While admitting that in. sometimes not included reports some data omitted for reasons of synthesis or gaps in the discussion, there are elements here of justified doubts. It was intended to determine how much can be transferred overseas by November 15

to 31 December and the figures were accepted: the need for 90,000 tons at Benghazi and 40,000 in Tripoli. So the requirement was not covered, albeit briefly. But even giving it to reach the next surprise, acceptance of 90,000 tons of materials as the basis of reasoning, although Cavallero the day before had talked about 150,000 tons per month and Magli had said clearly: "*this refers to those essential requirements below which you can't go. Therefore not been considered normal requirement by us but even that would be essential without which you do not know how to do it. That's why it's limited total number of tons*"⁽¹¹⁷⁾.

Operational needs were two: those safe for the conquest of Tobruk and those likely to oppose the British attack. Having regard to the clarification of Magli-that in itself was such as to cast doubt on the usefulness of the meeting-it appeared evident that the 90,000 tons could not cope with the one nor the other. However, even if the merits of Rommel's optimism to get away with what he was in Libya, was the second requirement, for which the day before Cavallero had expressed in tone worried: "*Do this [to Rommel] that the action will involve the consumption; After these present consumption, held our chances, as we are faced with a English attack*"? And also to emphasize as Rommel did not open his mouth, which would confirm his belief that he has already the essential point at its disposal and deemed utterly improbable a big enemy effort⁽¹¹⁸⁾. When, with Gen. von Ravenstein-also licensed in those days in Rome, was some aerial photos taken on 11 November showing the work of military rail line extension from Marsa Matruh towards the boundary, threw them to the ground by exclaiming: "I don't want to look at them!"⁽¹¹⁹⁾. in any event, he was of the opinion that, even if the worst case scenario, the opposing pressure would not sensitively influence before the third day after the beginning of the attack on Tobruk.

Rommel was the last opposing situation bulletin issued by *Panzergruppe Afrika* before *Crusader*: No. 4 on 11 Nov. Summary the enemy, which proceeds from the information received (sketch No. 37) the German intelligence service had expressed it appreciation on

the concept of the attack on Tobruk (and ignoring the possibility of a British initiative before the attack itself). In the assumption that on the first day of the Italian-German operation the opposing forces location remained unchanged, the calculation of time seemed simple. The 7th Armored Division could arrive in Marsa Matruh-and Daba around noon of the second day and, if only partially, the British 50th Motorized and the 1st and 2nd South Africa would have touched the border on the night of the third day. In essence, the English *"should be able to conduct an attack seeking the decision solely on the morning of the third day of attack."* As for the increased activity of enemy reconnaissance, *"the latter not much regarded as evidence of an impending offensive, but is made from English to learn about troop movements in the area of Sollum -Tobruk and Ain Gazala – Bir Hakeim – Bir el Gobi."* Without prejudice to the conviction of a true German underestimation British threat, we must mention also the thesis that the optimistic assumptions of Rommel-*deeply annoyed* for the mental attitude of the Comando Superiore, unwilling to accept risks not calculated-were *"ad usum Delphini"*.

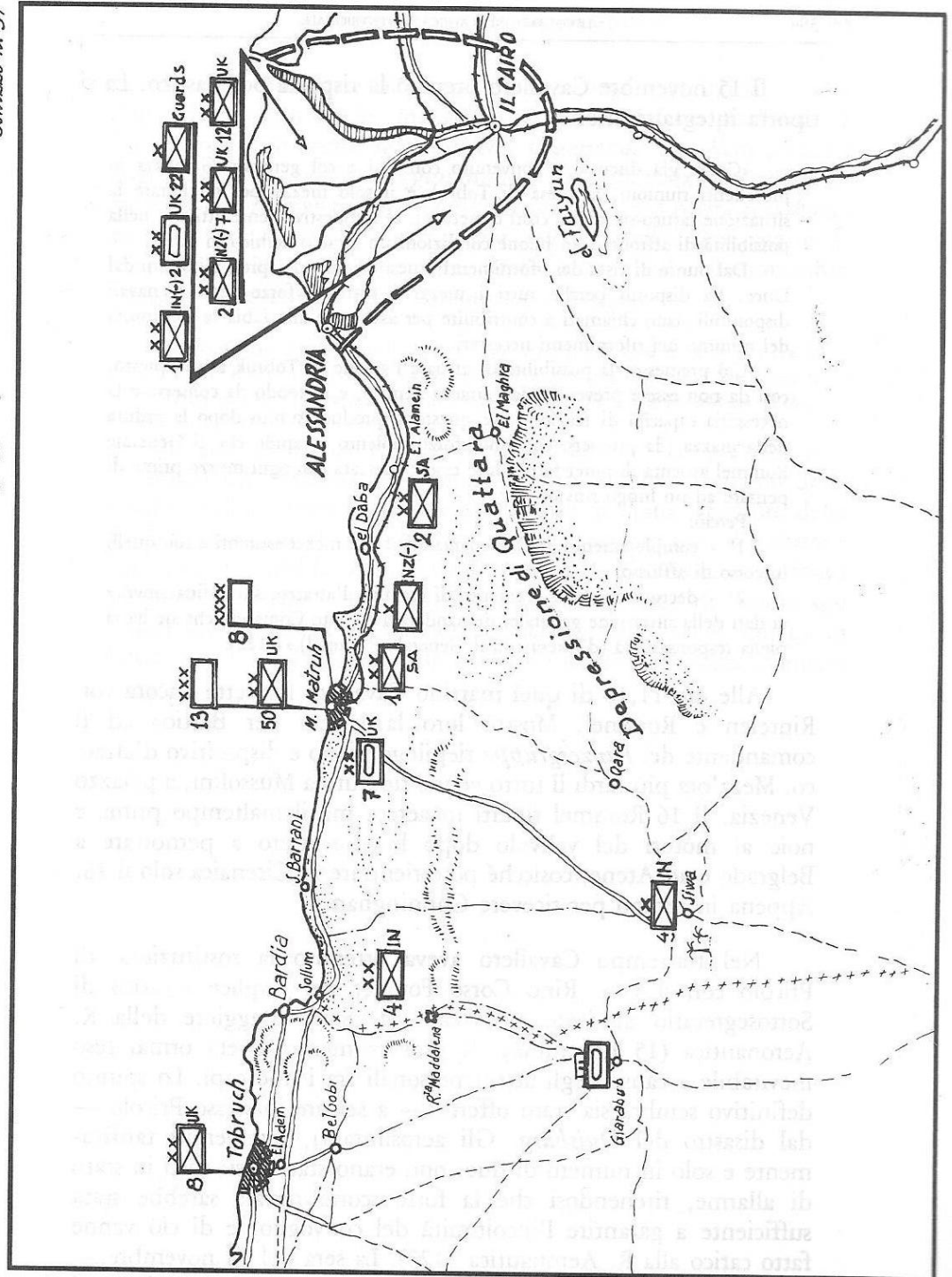
To calm the apprehensions in Italy-he wrote von Mellenthin-and to prevent any interference on their part, Rommel ordered his staff to take a confident tone in all discussions with Italian officers and myself, in November, when he was nearing the date of our attack, deliberately minimize the possibility of a British offensive whenever I entertain our allies.
(120).

Grounds of fairness aside⁽¹²¹⁾, the claim can mind be safe: valid, but only in its general lines. Is a question of nuances. A rough attitude is an account, the want deformation of another reality. Moreover, if Rommel had really found himself, in his underwear, imminent the move English, certain it wouldn't stayed a long time in Rome. However, the comment was clearly Comando Superiore based on skepticism:

"(...) This evaluation is based on the assumption that the present locations not dumb and that enemy divisions (except the 7th Armored) are only partially motorized. This assumption seems arbitrary, especially regarding the location, because you feel that the enemy, having inkling of our preparations, be placed his forces in order to be able to act promptly in case of an attack on Tobruk"⁽¹²⁰⁾.

LA SITUAZIONE BRITANNICA AL 10 NOVEMBRE 1941
secondo il servizio informazioni del Panzergruppe Afrika

Schizzo n. 37



On November 15 Cavallero prepared the answer to Bastico. The related in its entirety:

“As already discussed and agreed with you and with General Gambara in previous meetings, the capture of Tobruk is the only means to improve tactical-strategic situation cost and, if implemented in a timely manner, the ability to tackle in good condition an enemy attack in force.

From the point of view of supplies, this command, took orders from Mussolini, ordered because all means and all naval and aerial forces available are called upon to contribute to ensure the continuity of Libya minimum of necessary supplies.

In those circumstances, the possibility of implementing the action on Tobruk as soon as possible, so as not to be prevented from enemy attack, and in order to retain the necessary ability to respond if this is produced immediately after the fall of the fort (to be procured with a violent and quick effort that General Rommel ensures you can make), must be sought by any means before thinking about a long postponement.

Therefore:

1st-completion of preparation with the existing means and with those ongoing influx;

2nd-decision about the time to perform the attack, subject to the overall situation, data entrusted to this command that has responsibility (in agreement with the General Rommel)”

(122)

11:10 a.m. that Cavallero received again von Rintelen and Rommel. Showed them the letter for Bastico and Commander of the *Panzergruppe* summary plan and device's of attack. Half an hour later the whole thing was repeated to Mussolini at Palazzo Venezia. At 16th Rommel departed by plane, but first bad weather and trouble to aircraft engines after they forced him to spend the night in Belgrade and Athens, so that he could return to Cyrenaica only on the 18th. Just in time for Cunningham.

Meanwhile Cavallero had gotten Pricolo replaced with Gen. Rino Corso Fougier in the dual position of Under Secretary of State and Chief of staff of the R. Aeronautica (15 November). The measure had made it inevitable due to personal friction between the two leaders. The final cue appears to have been the effect-to hear the same Pricolo-from *Duisburg* disaster. The torpedo bombers, intervened belatedly and only two in number, were not all places in alarm condition, considering that the naval line would be strong enough to ensure the safety of the convoy, and this was done burdening the R. Aeronautica⁽¹²³⁾. On the evening of November 14-Pricolo had returned the 8th from Libya, where among other things he had witnessed the

return deliveries between Gen. Aimone-Cat and Marchesi-at the end of the evening, Mussolini said, "*and now we're talking about you. Actually your relationships with General Cavallero rather than improve have gone worse, is an abnormal situation and, although regretfully, I have to waive your co-operation. To you I say out loud, then if you want the usual letter we send to you*" ⁽¹²⁴⁾. " *But it wasn't over yet. On November 19 Cavallero received "farewell visit from Pricolo:*

“Among other things, Mr. Pricolo, asked about the failure to send fighters to Libya ⁽¹²⁵⁾, says that there they told him that it was not urgent and that then has retained to do apply the device to trap the sand” ⁽¹²⁶⁾.

The next day, Cavallero hastened to submit to a detailed and severe Mussolini to blatant support of the validity of the request for exemption of the Chief of staff of air force. The document, in which the word "*more careful and continuous care of the Comando Supremo*" for Cyrenaica, ended by emphasizing how the "*actual disobedience*" of orders received Pricolo had crippled the effectiveness of Italian forces in Libya, just as they had expected British offensive begins ⁽¹²⁷⁾.

NOTES ON CHAPTER FIVE

- (1): Mussolini and Hitler, quoted, p. 102. However, eight days later, in a letter written to convey the impressions of the first week of war in Russia, Hitler had to at least to change part thinking: «I accept with gratitude your generous offer, Duce, to send an Italian and Italian fighter aircraft in the Eastern Theater (op. cited above, p. 112).
 - (2) *ibid.*, p. 102.
 - (3) on 2 July von Rintelen had signaled the intention of the OKW to reinforce the two German divisions of the *Afrikakorps* in order to establish a reinforced armored Corp 'modern armed' and added that the large unit should be provided with plenty of reserve personnel and equipment (tanks and guns), so that we can resume very quickly there full efficiency also suffering heavy losses in a battle.
 - (4) E. VON RINTELEN, op. cited above, p. 143.
 - (5) B.H. LIDDELL HART, *Storia di una sconfitta*, cit., p. 208.
 - (6) Memo dated 24.7.1941-annex 12.
 - (7) DSCS, letter dated 28.7.1941.
 - (8) «My trip to Berlin is becoming an absolute necessity» Rommel had written to his wife (The Rommel Papers cited above).
 - (9) The views of the OKW is most effectively delivered by Gen, Halder, who noted in his diary under the date of July 29: *ensuring transport safety heading to North Africa it is up to Italy. In the present situation it would be criminal to assign Germans aircraft to this task.*
 - (10) The joint plan considered: the Terminology with the two German divisions and the *Savona*; an Army Corps at the siege of Tobruk with *Trento*, *Brescia* and *Pavia*; a mobile Corps with *Bologna* and *Ariete*. Pending the establishment of controls of two Corps, the Italian *Ariete* and *Bologna* divisions continued to depend on the command of X Corps. Until the *Savona* had not completed their deployment, the columns Mamman and Santamaria would remain available to Rommel, the Group was reconstituted the Santamaria on 9 June with a machine-gun company, a light tank company of the 4th Battalion, a company from 47/32, group from 75/27 on two batteries, a section from a section of 20 launchers of incendiary bombs, a police nuclei and 40 vehicles.
 - (11) DSCS, personal letter top commander N. A. dated 26.7.1941.,
 - (12) by way of comparison, at that time the two German divisions of DAK had 7,000 vehicles, while seven Italian divisions and all services of Libya had 8,900 (including 1,500 out or under repair).
- Was in progress the transformation of *Pavia* and *Bologna* divisions into motorized divisions and envisaged that of *Brescia* and of *Savona*. All had left in Tripolitania a battalion to Regiment with coastal defense duties and had enacted the Constitution of an accompanying weapons battalion, thus the four remaining battalions-corresponding to those considered by the new organic-could be powered without excessive difficulty.

(13) DSCSAS, f. 01/10847 sp. date 26.7.1941- annex 13.

(14) The 5th *leichte* Division transformation was underway and the 1st August was to take the name of 21st *Panzerdivision*.

(15) On 27 July the High Command wrote to the General staff of the R. Army to take stock of the situation of vehicles. To this Stewardship Superior Staff *have an idea exactly as much as possible about the status of land transport in Africa*.

For daily supplies of only three services-automotive, artillery and Commissariat-needed heavy truck 127 (thoroughly justified). Since they employed three to ten days for the return journey, the rise to 970 heavy trucks needs.

Adding the 8% for fuel needs and demands different, they came to a total of approximately 1,050 trucks.

In addition to these daily transport there were other requests, generally all urgent, of the various directorates of the stewardship, which involved a total of 2,627 travel/truck.

On the other hand the availability were represented by V auto-group, even inadequate to the needs of the square and the port of Tripoli; from the 4th auto-group, virtually absorbed by the services of the port of Benghazi, and from 1st auto-grouping that numbered about 700 trucks, of which 256 committed to fixed tasks. From 444 trucks stayed 15% had to remove one of inefficient and 8% for various needs. Remained so actually useable 342 daily trucks, which were to add 300 civil means.

The situation resulting from this was obviously unsustainable, especially for the inability to perform bulk craft supplies online (DSCSAS, f. 13650/Serv. 27.7.1941 date).

(16) DSCS, for il Duce date 5.8.1941 leader S.M.G.

(17) In the letter but Cavallero let go such an illusory claim, saying that August «*includes transporting cost of motorized Division Trieste* ». Actually it was just – and in best case-a first rate: 1,500 men and 320 vehicles.

(18) DSCS, f. 30329 op. date 4.8.1941. The subject of letter: «defense of Cyrenaica» is significant. The race time for the achievement of supremacy over the enemy was already lost and had to be taken for coping with realistic assumptions of a violent opponent move.

(19) DSCS, s.n. date 5.8.1941 letter of Chief of the General staff – annex No. 14.

(20) Diary Cavallero.

(21) DSCS, s.n date. 6.8.1941 letter.

(22) Of the 8.8.1941 session there are an unofficial report, in the form of a “*Notes about the meeting place from 9.45 a.m. to 10.45, for examination situation*” (annex No. 15), and one official, more synthetic, Basic for the next interview with Rommel (annex No. 16).

(23) The big unit was comparable to a light Armored Division. In November, will assume the title of "German" *Afrika* "Division and at the end of the same month the 90th Light Division.

(24) The recon grouping consisted of: a bn. of the P.A.I. (Italian Africa Police); a bn. M 13 tank by train; the III/32nd light tanks; a company of sappers. Flying battery group (65/17 pieces set on current-carrying capacity of prey of war); a group of 105/28 expected from Italy an expected 20 AC from Italy; a engineer (waiting in Italy); a mixed to form auto unit in Libya. To the

- grouping were assigned, from time to time, infantry units in relation to the tasks to be performed.
- (25) To return to Italy, Cavallero had issued two decrees by Mussolini. The existing 68 tank vessels (about 312,000 tons in total) were divided between the three armed forces and AGIP with obvious drawbacks of employment. It was therefore placed the creation of a single fleet conducted by maritime transport office working liquid fuels at the staff of R. Marina, by proxy of the Supreme command. That Office, headed by an Admiral, was composed of representatives of the Supreme Command of the armed forces and the three AGIP and had the task of accepting and processing requests for transportation of liquid fuel and motor fuels. The second decision concerned the fuel. « Ricello Etc. Ricci--noted on September 15 Cavallero diary-it is unknown yet what Italian fuel product. It was therefore decided to establish at the AGIP-organ recipient of sheets of liquid fuels, fuels and lubricants, imports and national production of a statistical office is responsible for keeping updated the overall situation and particular. Monthly breakdown of availability was to take place on the basis of agreement between the Minister of Corporations and the Chief of the General staff.
- (26) DSCS, minutes of meetings (morning and evening) of 25.8.1941.
- (27) DSCSAS, f./01 op. 13263 date 31.8.1941.
- (28) DSCS, f. 1-c/7994 date 14.11.1941.
- (29) date 12.6.1941 Reminder-Annex No. 17.
- (30) In the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* had 254 efficient tanks: 88 light, 132 medium and 31 heavy, as well as *cruisers* of war spoils.
- (31) DSCS, f. 1 B/S.M.R.A. date 11.7.1941 of 12819
- (32) DSCSAS, f./01 op. 10769 date. 26.7.1941.
- (33) DSCSAS, reminder of date 17.7.1941 Commander 5th aerial fleet.
- (34) The agreements had been signed as 18.7.1941 between the Sub-Chief of S.M. of R., air force Ggen. Santoro, and leader of the German Liaison Office at Superaereo, gen. von Pohl-Annex No. 18.
- (35) DSCSAS, f. date 18.7.1941 date 01/10898 Upper command.
- (36) DSCS, letter of Gen. Pricolo to Gen. Cavallero on 31.7.1941.
- (37) With regard to the issue of Malta in World War II see. MARIANO Gabriel, Operation C 3, Malta, USM, Rome 1965.
- (38) ALBERT SANTONI and FRANCESCO MATTESINI, op, cit., pp.. 57-58..
- (39) *ibid.*, p. 59.
- (40) It is necessary to admit that the same organization of convoys was not certain impeccable, despite many months of war. The convoy received orders to the mission operation a few hours before departure for reasons of secrecy, so that they lacked the time to study the route of the convoy was a meeting of all the commanders for consideration of the measures to be taken in case of offence

- the enemy. At night the navigation was devoid of exploration and aerial, escort which could lead to spend the night near the Tunisian coast or Pantelleria or even in Sicily, but the convoy leader did not know the areas that best lend themselves to the position of coastal batteries, in order to definitely exploit protection. Often, then, a convoy was escorted away from war, ships without the convoy leader was aware of the role and position of these (A. COCCHIA, op. cited, pp. 114-115).
- (41) DSCS, reminder No. 103 of Supermarina on 18.5.1941. It should be noted that Gen. Pricolo, at least personally, considered essential to the enterprise: *"there was no need to occupy Malta: it would have been enough to sink or severely damage the convoys; and we saw that we could do it, albeit with some risk is inevitable, because the island was forced to surrender as was to happen in the spring of 1942"* (FRANCESCO PRICOLO, the Regia Aeronautica during World War II, Longanesi, Milano 1971, p. 370). The thesis is debatable, but of course, this part, it seems that in the operational problems, even in the most arduous, fundamental both to have a clear idea about what you want to do. That just did not happen.
- (42) In May Air Mar. Hugh Lloyd, new Commander of the air force of Malta, had received from the head of S.M. Royal Air Force fight directives: *your task in Malta is to sink any ship from Europe directed to Africa.* "
- (43) The group consisted of twelve Hurricane II, eight of them armed by four guns and others with twelve guns.
- (44) with regard to relations with France, on Gen. Anuro Vacca Maggolini, President of the Italian Armistice Commission, will send Cavallero a memory, dated 13.8.1941, with a series of considerations on the possible course of action to take against the Vichy Government, where the usefulness of an our approximates this, approach, to overcome the same provisions the same as Germany.
- (45) The same convenience was not recognized for slow convoys, because the elongation of the journey would involve a significant increase in the period out of air protection.
- (46) DCSCS, report date 5.7.1941-annex b. 19.
- (47) In late July will follow the *Warspite* to the United States to undergo major repairs. .
- (48) The bombing was carried out by five units. Due to failures occurring on two of the aircraft departed, the action was carried out by three aircraft to 2.45 and 4.20 (see g. S., op. cited, p. 37).
- (49) The losses were 15 dead and 18 prisoners, 9 boats, a MTL and a MAS sunk; a MAS captured (the entire crew had died); two aircraft shot down.
- (50) DSCS, summaries of the meeting dated 28.7.1941.
- (51) For completeness of information it should be said that according to Gen. Pricolo *"would have been quite possible to intercept the convoy and the modest naval force X on day 24 and right in the Central Mediterranean, with obvious probability of annihilation, although force H again cruised near the island of Galire"* (F. PRICOLO, op. cited, p. 370).
- (52) A. JACHINO, sunset of a large Marina cit., pp. 272-273.

- (53) Ibid, pp. 275-276.
- (54) Diary Cavallero.
- (55) Ten units were killed, others (all fighters) were lost to various causes.
- (56) F. PRICOLO, op. cited above, p. 377.
- (57) A. COCCHIA, op. cited above, pp. 336-337.
- (58) Diary Cavallero.
- (59) As told to Priolo at Romintern, Goering thought too dangerous routes to Tripoli and too difficult to ensure effective protection for the convoys near Malta. His idea was to strengthen the place of Benghazi, Derna and Bardia and to follow the eastern routes, close to joining Cape Matapan-Cape Crio (Crete)-Derna.
- (60) HUGH LLOYD, Briefed to attack: Malta's part in African Victory, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1949.
- (61) W. CHURCHILL op. cited, part 111, vol. II, p. 131-132.
- (62) DSCS, f. 10820 op. date 14.10.1941.
- (63) The first of September the situation of naphtha was the following: 85,000 tons of Commons; monthly consumption of 66,000 tons, of which 50,000 out of necessity and contingency 16,000 constants. To provide an order of magnitude, laying a barrage of mine in front of the port of Benghazi had been deemed to involve consumption of 15,000 tons. (Diary Cavallero).
- (64) DSCS, for il Duce in date 14.10.1941 of the Chief of the General staff.
- (65) DSCS, tele date 31.10.1941 01/18055.
- (66) The command of composition and terminology was based on the staff of Gen. Gause, who had assumed the post of Chief of S.M.
- (67) The DAK went through a period of crisis of command. Assuming the responsibility of Rommel's spearhead, had left the interim command of DAK to Gen. Ferdinand Schaal, immediately replaced for health reasons since Gen. Philip Müller-Gebhard, even these repatriates to illness towards the end of September. Gen. Ludwig Crüwell arrives in Africa in October. As the Chief of staff, Lieut. Col. von dem Borne will be repatriated in early October and replaced by Lt.col. Fritz Bayerlein.
- (68) The Italian units were: the II/15th and III/16th *Savona* infantry, the 3rd/40th infantry of *Bologna*, the IV group Genoa Gunners Cavalry squadrons an infantry detachment of the guard to the border, the 282nd e 342nd artillery group of border guard and units of the army and Navy.
- (69) This position-prescribed Rommel-of being destroyed by heavy artillery, with his bullets will form a Crown of funnels needed to fire centers, with their employment, will later a cornerstone" (historical Diary of XXI Corps Command, 16.8.1941 date).

(70) Since the last attempt to take Tobruk discontent had emerged. In June Col. von Herff had written in Berlin: "*No longer able to understand the reason for these attacks on Tobruk: Although the solidity of the stronghold and the extent of its garrison were already known, every newly arrived battalion was sent to attack it and, obviously, failed to pass. The result is that Tobruk there is unit that has not suffered any blow to ... Many of the orders issued by the Afrika Korps, we subordinate officers fail to understand them.*" Gen. Bodewin Keitel, Chief of staff of the army, brother of Mar. Keitel, had a note inside a significant consideration: "*on the other hand, the Afrika Korps also bears another burden, consisting of the General personality, out of his way to give and to give orders.*"

Many officers were questioned in private by the OKW on their return from Africa: Streich, Kirchheim, Olbrich, then will von Herff, von dem Borne, von Schwerin. To Mar. Brauchitsch, who had asked if it was because of the tremendous heat that "*down there in Libya we scanned each other*", Streich would answer: "No, Herr Feldmarschall, but one thing should be said is that between a commander of brave and adventurous company and one genius strategist runs an enormous difference" (d. IRVING, op. cited, pp. 109, 121 and 123).

(71) F. W. VON MELLENTHIN, op. cited above, p. 57.

(72) It is believed identified the 2nd and 7th Armored Division, the New Zealand Division, the British 12th and the 1st and 4th Indian.

(73) DSCSAS, f. 30/41 date of 6.9.1941 the *Panzergruppe* command's. The letter was also sent to von Rintelen, who transmitted to the Comando Supremo with other translation (DSCS, f. 41 523/ date of 12.9.1941 the German General at the Comando Supremo).

(74) DSCSAS, f. 01/13950 op. date 8.9.1941.

(75) DSCS, tele 30546 op. date 8.9.1941, pre 20:00.

(76) The thing had a sequel the following month. On October 18 von Rintelen offered again, on the disposal of the OKW, the material for the construction of a railway line from the countryside from el-Abiar to Gazala (280 km, gauge development 75 cm).

The Comando Superiore, in agreement with the *Panzergruppe* command, had already done for him to consider an accomplishment like that with weapons material that Rommel was reserved to ask: in Germany. The most economical and urges that appeared to connect to el-Abiar existing railway to Benghazi- Barce (290 kilometers development), however the track gauge was one meter. The OKW had offered Decauville type material, with potential for transport then reduced compared to the previous (maximum 150 tons per train). On the other hand was more easy and quick installation. In essence would be also fine, but the transportation of materials (8-10,000 tons, over a thousand between locomotives, tank wagons and railway wagons and two heavy service stations for transfer of materials to set to work) should not in any way affect regular supplies. Of course the plan was abandoned, due to the onset of the British offensive.

(77) Diary Cavallero on 15.9.1941.

(78) Later translated by the English, poetically, in *Midsummer Night's Dream* (a Midsummer night's dream).

(79) Gen. Müller-Gebhard, Commander of the 15th *Panzerdivision*, which had followed the right column consisting of the own recon group, wrote: "our three combat groups entered for a hundred miles into enemy territory,

converging in the established meeting point with no resistance whatsoever. I was stunned to find in the named place Gen. Rommel who awaited us there had preceded all" (d. IRVING, op. cited, p. 134).

- (80) In fact, the border the enemy had established a cover device placed under the command of Gen. Messervy, Commander of 4th Indian Division. Security elements were provided by the 7th support group and the 22nd Guards Brigade.
- (81) It was two orders of 4th Regiment operations. In the first, on 23 August, it was said that in case of withdrawal the 7th Armored Division would have to move to stop the opponent South of Marsa Matruh and the 7th Indian Brigade, was supposed to contain the German advance, giving security to the exposed flank. In the second, on 10 September, the advanced grouping, which had taken over the duties of the 7th Brigade, was supposed to contain the German attack, inflicting losses but without being drawn into major fighting.
- (82) DSCSAS, f./41 95 date of 16.9.1941 composition and terminology.
- (83) In the following days were found and rescued five men and four aircraft.
- (84) For documents on the controversy Aimone Cat-Rommel vds. DSCSAS date 7.10. 1941, collecting copies of the letters. For the contrasts in cooperation between 5th Air Fleet and German vds Commands. G. SANTORO., op. cited above, pp. 96-106.
- (85) DSCSAS cit., f. 4060/Op. 5 date of 24.9.1941 5th Air Fleet.
- (86) DSCSAS cit., 204 f./419 kdos. date of 3.10.1941 the *Panzergruppe* command's.
- (87) DSCSAS cit., f. 4311/Op. date of 5 6.10.1941 the Commander of the 5th Air Fleet.
- (88) DSCSAS, f. 261/Segr./Com. 41 date of 12.10.1941 the Commander of *Panzergruppe Afrika*.
- (89) Gen. Frolich tried always to oppose the invasion of Rommel in control of air units in Cyrenaica, resulting in considerable personal friction. Who was in the worst situation was Col. Otto Heymer, head of the core of air link with the command of composition and terminology (Koluft), which will be sent by Rommel before the court martial for failing to organize effectively the air competition during the initial phase of operation Crusader.
- (90) "Aviation not engaged". -telegraphed Bastico- *Expected for deference General Pricolo arrival to represent change opportunities Commander 5th Air Fleet Commander Western aviation. Since visiting Mr. Pricolo retards gen replacement opportunities prospectus. Gen Aimone & Gen. Da Barberino. Officer commanding 5th Air Fleet signaled Gen. Marchesi (...)*" (DSCSAS, tele/01 op. 15370 date 26.9.1941, at 19.20). The movement took place, in fact, more than a month later: the 4.11.1941.
- (91) The historical Diary XXI Corps Command, f. 668 Op/1 date 13.9.1941.
- (92) On October 10 on Gen. Fedele De Giorgis had assumed command of the Division in place of Gen. Maggiani, who returned.
- (93) The October 10 on Gen. Benvenuto Gioda had assumed command of the Division in place of Gen. Zac, who returned.

- (94) G. Rizzo, op. cited., p. 165. Given the post of head G.S of the *Ariete* Division covered by the author at the time, would feel that his feelings were justified, namely related to the broader context of episodes which not only accident Aimone Cat-Rommel, discussed earlier.
- (95) Report of Inspector P.A.I. on censorship second fortnight of September 1941, dated 6. 10.1941.
- (96) DSCSAS, f. 1151 P.T.O dated 25.10.1941 of the comandante superiore.
- (97) By the above-mentioned Inspectorate report P.A.I. on the second fortnight of September 1941 censorship, dated 6.10.1941.
- (98) The historical Diary of the Commander XXI Corps, f. s. n. dated 4.11.1941. The Commander CC.RR.
- (99) Actually had landed in the Middle East 770 tanks, 1040 artillery pieces, 900 mortars, 34,000 vehicles and 668 airplanes (I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, op. cited., vol. II, app. 7; Vol. 111 p. 4).
- (100) Popular Culture Ministry, Special Bulletin 1910-1941.
- (101) the measures undertaken on were necessarily limited. It would have needed a greater aerial surveillance across the Sahara and a better efficiency of saharan, consisting of principals generally from too many uncomfortable against Libyan motorized elements or circulating armored vehicles to their liking. The relocation of these presidios formed a semicircle from Gat, near the Algerian border, to Zella, about 170 kilometers southwest of Marada.
- (102) DSCSAS, f. 01/17550op. date 26.10.1941 -Annex No. 20.
- (103) DSCSAS, s.n. meno dated 5.10.1941.
- (104) DSCSAS, f. 01/17717 op. 27.10.194 date.
- (105) DSCSAS, f. 01/18865op. dated 11.1941-Annex No. 21.
- (106) DSCS, tele 1198/5 dated 26.10.1941.
- (107) The organization of the mot. Div. type A.S., included 120 anti-tank guns: 68 Solothurn rifles, 20 and 52 from 47/32 pieces. But the *Trento* and *Trieste* had a bersaglieri Regiment in reinforcement.
- (108) The *Duisburg* was the leader of the convoy steamship. Actually the convoy was officially marked with the nominative case Beta: For the vds. ALDO COCCHIA, The Italian Navy in the second world war, vol. 7th, Defense: traffic with North Africa: from 1 October 1941 to September 30, 1942, ch. 111, USM, Rome 1962.
- (109) it was projects drawn up in accordance with the provisions issued by the Supreme Command in mid-August. The first (operation *Taurus*) concerned the bombardment of Tobruk during an Italian-German land offensive or as a result of an initiative by British ground offensive. The second (operation *Orion*) was an action against the squadron's Mediterranean Fleet, leaving Alexandria to transpose from protection or Tobruk. However, because of the constraints imposed by the range of the fighters, the fleet should not as a rule exceed the meridian of Bardia.

- (110) DSCS, minutes of the meeting.
- (111) Diary Cavallero.
- (112) A. COCCHIA, op. cited above, pp. 75-78.
- (113) Diary Cavallero, date 13.11.1941. Are significant: few lines I conclude that, as long as the Duce's desire is to do the action, it is our duty to consider all the elements to show that the decision be taken advisedly, albeit with a small risk, otherwise there would be war. "
- (114) DSCS, f. 268/SGR dated 13.11.1941.
- (115) DSCS, for il Duce dated 13.11.1941- Annex No. 22.
- (116) the minutes of meetings held by Chief G.S. General, vol. II, USE, Rome 1983, p. 112.
- (117) for "normal requirement", it shall be presumed to be intended for ordinary supplies, namely for everyday life, not fighting.
- (118) The November newsletter n. 4 of the *Panzergruppe* close's with a sentence very explicit: "in summary, we can say that the enemy situation on the Sollum -Tobruk, as well as in the Western desert, has not undergone significant changes over the past four weeks.
- (119) DESMOND YOUNG, op. cited above, p. 135.
- (120) F.W. VON MELLENTIN, op. cited above, p. 70. The November in an interview with a liaison officer with the composition and terminology, which spoke of the approaching British offensive, observed: "Major. Revetria (Chief Information Office of Higher Command) is too nervous. Tell him to calm down because the British attack."
- (121) it is difficult to ascribe objectivity to the thesis, commonly accepted, that the responsibility of commanders and Command friction between Italians and Germans had always and only of the first!
- (122) DSCS, f. 30921 op. dated 15.11.1941. The answer was logical and sensible, however, to a thorough examination, reveals an ambiguity: clear idea membership of Rommel and the reference to the natural responsibility of the Comando Superiore, but ... why the "memorandum of understanding with General Rommel"? The Bastico letter arrived at the 18 November.
- (123) F. PRICOLO, op. cited above, p. 401. See Diary dated 10.11.1941- annex Cavallero No. 423.
- (124) see footnote 16.
- (125) it was the Macchi 202 group 170 of the flock. (126) Diary Cavallero, 19.11.1941 date.
- (127) the diary to Cavallero, il Duce 20.11.1941-date annex 24. The accusation was not picked up by Mussolini. On the contrast Cavallero-Pricolo vds. F. PRICOLO., op. cited above, pp. 393-401, and g. S., op. cited above, pp. 121-123.

Chapter Sixth **OPERATION CRUSADER**

1. THE REARRANGEMENT OF THE BRITISH ORGANIZATION.

In the summer of 1941 the British organization in Middle East underwent substantial changes only in part caused by operations in Cyrenaica. Initially there was Churchill's dissatisfaction about the use of personnel, i.e. the inequality between this force and fighting force. Wavell had rightly pointed out as his theatre of operations was made up of a vast underdeveloped region, with immense fix surface communications, and subdivided into theaters on each of which it was necessary to solve problems clearly differentiated in a tangled military political situation. The maneuver for internal lines where he was to follow for the logistical organization: autonomy for 9 divisions entering the year, to 14 in June 1941 and 23 in March 1942. In early 1941 the force provision in the Middle East must be the establishment of a strong logistic base in a central location. This was immediately recognized by the Ministry of war, which in October 1940 he had set three goals reached the 340,000 men. From January to July, 240,000 came in men and more than one million tons of materials (with an average of 5,000 tons per day). On 11 March had entered into force the American law "Lend and Lease" and Roosevelt had decreed that the defense of Britain and Greece was of vital importance for the defense of the United States, so that while a rate of material prepared in fulfillment of contracts concluded in the British and French 1939 was started in Egypt, the Government in London was able to draw on stocks assembled in the United Kingdom for accept the insistent requests for Wavell knowing that starting in October could replace these materials with others coming from America.

Also, since Roosevelt had shown very interested in Middle Eastern Affairs, he was sent to Cairo Gen. J.M. Whiteley with a list of materials that within three months would land in Egypt "to save the Suez Canal". The initiative was unusual and very large list, but before the end.

in the summer the most part than invoked was en route to the Suez Canal ⁽¹⁾. But in the meantime Churchill had formed a very clear idea of the State as such and on 3 June signaled Roosevelt to believe must give more breathing space to organize the backline in Egypt, the logistical heart of the entire Theater in Middle East operations, even taking account of American aid. For this purpose a Commission composed of military and civilian experts of high degree, was about to depart by plane and was pleased that Averell Harriman. -Special Representative of the US President in London from June 1 1941, with the rank of Minister-he had joined the group as an independent observer ⁽²⁾. At the same time (June 4) Churchill sent a dispatch to Wavell:

- “1. for some time now I'm looking to unload from your shoulders part of the burden from your organizational tasks, while you are engaged to conduct four campaigns, as well as being beset by quasi political and diplomatic activity.
2. During the past nine months we have posted nearly 50% of our total production, with the exception of Tanks and of part destined for India. At this moment you have at your orders a force of 350,000 soldiers, 500 field guns, anti-350 aircraft pieces, 450 heavy Tanks and 350 anti-tank pieces. From January to May, more than 7,000 mechanical transportation have achieved. Only recruits, aside from complete units, there we sent 13,000 since the beginning of the year. The course of operations in the South has already allowed two months ago to start a shift of northward, however it is clear that I find it difficult to form a Brigade or a battalion. You telegrams with continuous complaints shortage of means of transport which, as you stated, it limits all your operations.
3. in order to help you achieve the best results, I lifting as far as possible from organizational tasks, leaving you free to devote yourself completely so the task to issue directives and to operations. Here at home, General Brooke has to organize and train an army quite numerous, but is supported by the various offices of the Ministry of war and the supplies. Even in the Middle East you will have to get such a division of labor, while allowing in this case that your supreme authority of Commander-in-Chief throughout the kingdoms of the theatre of operations.
4. the above said also applies, *mutatis mutandis* {the things being changed which need to be changed}, to aviation and naval airpower.
5. the deficiencies of prevented vessels bring reinforcements to the Middle East to the extent that I had hoped a few months ago and the threat definitely exists of an invasion in late summer and autumn had have made much Higher status, and the command of the forces in Britain. Nevertheless, it is hoped, as long as the situation allows, to send you over the next few months, that is in June, July, August and September, another division of

Infantry, In addition to the 50th, as well as a full contingent of recruits, specialists and equipment of all kinds. So it should be possible to arrange for the campaigns of autumn and winter, which can be very harsh, these mobile forces:

four Australian divisions; a New Zealand Division;

two British and Indian divisions (4th and 5th);

the 6th Infantry Division, from getting organized on the spot; the 50th Infantry Division;

the new Division (total of three British divisions).

You ready or under construction the 7th and 2nd Armored Division. You also need to make the best possible use of the Cavalry Division, already trained, it is transformed into an Armored Division. Total fifteen divisions. This represents about 600,000 men from which, without prejudice to the mobile divisions, units will have to be taken to the garrison and the backline.

6. In the future all Anglo-Indian divisions will be concentrated in Basra, and I hope that Eritrea, Abyssinia, the Kenya and Somalia could be left to the indigenous African troops (less one Brigade of Africa which must be returned to Western Africa) and the white police, Army.

7. the development and maintenance of the army of the Nile, in Cyrenaica and in Syria, would require an organization and a series of workshops on a much greater scale than they have now. Do not simply increase the strength and efficiency of Egyptian factories, but other bases, with its port facilities, must be created, say to Port Sudan and Massawa, using perhaps the city of Asmara that has beautiful buildings as well as Djibouti, when we will. At the same time, the Government of India will provide to various large scale increments, with our help, in hopes that at least six or seven divisions, with related services, may be soon come into action from that country.

8. I propose, therefore, to establish under your high authority an organization led by a high-ranking officer called "Quartermaster-General of the army in the Middle East". This officer will have a broad band of employees, taken in great part from your already existing administrative branch, supplemented by civilian elements competent whose number will increase continuously, intended to make to you, as mentioned above, services that the Ministry of war and that supplies have to General Brooke (...).⁽³⁾.

The "I" was pure and simple expression of courtesy. Since May 19 on Gen. Rizwana Haining, Deputy Chief of the Imperial General staff, was appointed Quartermaster-General for precise determination of Churchill. His duties were vast and complex, but his mission was a first step of essentially exploratory character. He must in fact make a thorough investigation and report to the Government within two weeks on how best to achieve the general directives received: supervision and centralized control of the rear, better logistics services

the Organization for the repair of motor vehicles and armored vehicles, use the logistic personnel apparatus.

Haining arrived in Cairo on June 9 and, as far as they were going on the Syria campaign and operation *Battleaxe*, managed to collect useful elements for the report within the fixed time limits. Churchill had written about it to Wavell: "*I hope that [the report] will be stretched out by mutual agreement, however all differences will be readily arranged by me. What's more, I will not allow that this managerial pattern to lose its effectiveness or, during its next practice, being mutilated.*" There was no need of the weight of his authority: the three commanders in Chief approved the conclusions of Haining, which, in summary, translated in the observation that the problem does not concern only the army, but all three armed forces and their relations with the Egyptian Government-as well as the British Government-so if the Quartermaster General was to complete the task received would have made it necessary to broaden his scope so as to achieve coordination between the three armed forces, various British ministries and the Egyptian Government, while leaving to the Commander-in-Chief as running fit in day-to-day administration. Haining won to reconsider a similar proposal, although limited to the political sphere, advanced by the commanders in Chief on April 18, 1941, after which they themselves had found the time saved when Eden was held in the Middle East with the authority to decide without consulting London. So the June 28 Oliver Lyttelton, Chairman of the Board of Trade, was appointed Minister of State in the Middle East, a representative of war cabinet in place to provide commanders in chief political guidance and exercise oversight on the activities of the Director General, including that connected with supplies coming from the United States.

In early July he formed a Council of war under the Presidency of Lyttelton. Permanent members were the three commanders in Chief, the Director General, Ambassador to Egypt and, when available, the Premier of South Africa, the Ambassador to Iraq, the High Commissioner in Palestine, the rulers of Cyprus and Aden and a representative of the Government of India. For obvious practical reasons was also formed a Defense Committee, organized as a Sub-Committee of the Council of war, consisting of the

Minister, by the commanders in Chief and Quartermaster-General for consideration and decisions about specific military and technical issues ⁽⁴⁾.

On 2 July the Gen. Auchinleck took de facto command of the land forces in the Middle East ⁽⁵⁾. Churchill, who expected to see a full harmony of views, had promptly sent a honeyed telegram:

"You assume the important responsibility in a time of crisis. When all the elements of the situation there will have been submitted, it will be up to you to decide whether to return or not, and when, the offensive in the Western desert. You should bear in mind particularly the situation of Tobruk, reinforcements who continue to flock to the enemy in Libya and the German concerns temporary for the invasion of Russia. You should also consider the dangers of operations in Syria, going so slowly, and the need for a decision on one or both sides. You decide if and when such operations can be coordinated among them. The urgency of these issues we will prevail by itself. We will be glad to know your opinion as soon as you can".

(6).

And the next day he said, "*once Syria has been liquidated, we hope that you will take into consideration the use of Wilson in the Western desert: it is of course up to you*". The thought of Churchill was clear: speed up the campaign of Syria and conclude as soon as possible; in the short term, possibly without even waiting for the end of operations in Syria, attacking in Cyrenaica entrusting command of forces to Wilson. Obviously the *Prime Minister* had not understood the character of the new Commander in Chief. Auchinleck replied two days later: no offensive was thinkable without a secure base of operations; this security meant the total employment of Syria and its consolidation; the consolidation included the solid defense of Cyprus; This defense required to send at least a Division on the island. Fixed these points you could consider offensive against Libya, which was based on three essential conditions. Firstly, the availability of two or three armored divisions and a motorized Division. Secondly, an aerial component available for large ground units (tactically independent of the Royal Air Force) composed of fighters, medium bombers, reconnaissance equipment and for direct support. Thirdly, the co-operation of the Mediterranean Fleet, either by direct action or by the offense against the Italian-German maritime communications. Of course the offensive would have meant the Elimination of the axis from North Africa, but for logistical needs would be marked in phases, the first of which was to be the re-conquest of Cyrenaica.

The stance of Auchinleck for aviation stemmed from many exposed arguments by the main contributors. Large unit commanders were convinced that the Royal Air Force did not provide them the support that they could and should give, and Cunningham did the same for his fleet. Then, without wishing to undermine the principle that final responsibility for aviation use belonged to air Commander in Chief, wanted a tactical solution-order more satisfying. No wonder. During the campaign in Greece with Gen. Carlo Geloso, Commander of the 11th Army, had proposed a part should be decentralized and airfield, on the opposite side, the *Royal Air Force* was renamed by British troops *Royal Absent Force*. In Africa, if raised the question of Auchinleck strong army aviation, Rommel wanted to: use directly or the units of *Fliegerfuhrer Afrika* is, possibly, the part of the 5th Air Fleet.

Churchill's reply was immediate:

- “1. agree on the need to finish in Syria; Here we have always thought that the possession of Syria is the necessary premise to hold or to resume Cyprus. It is hoped that Syria could be liquidated quickly and that the enemy will not come to Cyprus. The earlier of these two operations compared to the offensive in the Western desert, after what has happened, is fully accepted.
2. The Western desert is the theatre that you will decide in autumn the defense of the Nile Valley. Just recapturing lost airports of Eastern Cyrenaica, our fleet and our aviation will continue to operate effectively against enemy shipping supplies.
3. In his message of April 18 General Wavell claimed to have trained personnel for six armored regiments waiting Tanks. It was this consideration that resulted in the decision to send *Tiger*. Also, I travel along the route of the other three regiments of Tanks. Your need for armored vehicles is so completely satisfied, with Wavell and you put both your emphasis on the need for further training for these devices already trained. We calculate that you should have by the end of July to, 500 Tanks of cruiser of infantry and of American cruisers, where your workshops are conveniently arranged, besides a large number of different types of light Tanks and armored cars.
4. this situation may not improve in July and August if not for some American material arrives and few replacements from the island. Remember that even afterwards, by September, we have to get ready, to resist the invasion (...).
5. (...).
6. I was made to know the extent of our aircraft reinforcements. It seems likely that during the months of July, August and part of September must have a distinct air superiority (...).

7. all this we add the question of Tobruk. We cannot judge from what will be the offensive value of Tobruk between two months or what will happen in the meantime (...).

8. For all these reasons it seems hard that your situation may be better after the middle of September than it is at present: indeed, it could be worse. I am sure you carefully but urgently, the entire problem (...).

11. as regards the air situation, I believe that for all transactions the breath you foresee the use of the entire air force deployed in the Middle East, taking of course aware that the aviation should play its predominant strategic function and not be dispersed to provide small troops protection umbrellas, as seems to have happened during the battle of Sollum. In your telegram talk of supporting the army, aircraft used for independent strategic tasks. The question is: in what proportions? These are to be agreed upon from time to time with consultations between commanders in Chief. Such agreements should not, however, prevent the total participation of any broader aviation projects you have to study. You can't help but feel that in the battle of Sollum our air superiority was wasted and our forces of Tobruk remained inactive while all enemy Tanks available were committed to break our offensive in the desert”⁽⁷⁾.

The subsequent dispatch of Auchinleck showed Churchill that “*existed between us serious differences of views and reviews*”⁽⁸⁾. Auchinleck said that “*after having consulted with the Commander in Chief of the Mediterranean and the air Commander in Chief, I have decided to accept the plan of my predecessor and to strengthen Cyprus as soon as possible with a Division.*” He agreed on the need to retake Cyrenaica, but could not guarantee to keep Tobruk over the month of September. As for the personnel of the six Tank regiments, had indeed been reported as trained, but it was now necessary to put it in terms of employing new American material well technically and tactically. By the end of July was thought to have 500 Tank altogether, however recent experience “*showed clearly that in each operation you need a Tank reserve equal to 50%. This allows you to have the 25% in repair workshop and the 25 percent available for the immediate replacement of losses incurred in combat. Considering the 50 Tanks at Tobruk and the necessary reserves, I will not have more than 350 Tanks available for country operations*”⁽⁹⁾.

When Churchill read the message, was seriously disappointed: “*General commented about the 50% reserve desired-can enjoy similar comfort only in heaven and those that require not always manage to go*”⁽¹⁰⁾.

He was saddened and angered. After many efforts had failed to send in the Middle East the British 50th Division and does not resign himself to accept that it was sent to Cyprus. It was a question very important psychologically. The fact that British personnel losses in the Middle East to surpass those of other *Commonwealth* countries was not reflected in the official names of large units. The 7th "Armored Division" British did not appear to be entirely by name; the 4th and 5th "Indian" Division had a third of the infantry and British artillery. It was not known by the public; the use of insulated British battalions, such as those of the 6th Infantry Division, was not even mentioned. This was useful to the enemy propaganda to assert some semblance of truth that Britain grudging the blood of his men, and offered an opportunity to unfavorable comments in Australia and in the United States.

Even the Chief of staff intervened. The doubt of Auchinleck to hold Tobruk after September had them hit. Accordingly-without prejudice to the uncertainty of the Russian campaign, whose negative developments "*Russia can collapse at any moment*" wrote, in their opinion could have reflected on the invasion of the United Kingdom-were willing to take some risk and return immediately to the Middle East another 150 cruisers and 40,000 men, because "*you have from here under the impression that the best opportunity, if not the only one to retake Cyrenaica is to launch an offensive at the latest before the end of September.*" If you had considered impossible but instead Auchinleck over the desired offensive postings were sent to certainty gained that the invasion would not take place that year. As you can imagine, the Prime Minister joined with a personal telegram: the Defense Committee of the Cabinet of war-he said-was "pensive" the idea that the 50th Division, only full British Division had tied up in Cyprus; couldn't what fears could exist about the possibility of an immediate German offensive from the North against the Middle East; He felt that the opportunity to launch a big battle in Cyrenaica was unique; advocated that the command of the Western desert was entrusted to Wilson "*unless of course you don't want to take command personally.*"

Auchinleck was not the type to easily change his views. Before he sent a long letter to Gen. Dill

into an analytical framework of the situation and telling him about the Western desert, "*which I am absolutely ready to accept a reasonable risk, as I think you know, but clearly inadequate means attached is equivalent to face unreasonable risks in the present circumstances*" ⁽¹¹⁾. Then answered to Churchill reaffirming this concept and concluding:

"My immediate intentions are: first, strengthen as soon as possible the situation in Cyprus and Syria and defend our positions in this sector. Second, regarding the hastening, reorganizing and rearming, all very necessary operations, divisions and Brigades, which have not only suffered losses of men and material in Greece, Crete, in Libya, in Eritrea and Syria, but had to be used in most cases not as complete formations but piecemeal. Third, stress, along with the Director General, the reorganization and revision of refueling services, transport and repairs in the backline. Four, ensuring the training and equipment of our armored formations, without which there is no offensive. Fifth, carry out reconnaissance and preparing with energy plans for an offensive in Libya, as provided in the telegram of commanders in Chief to Chief of staff of 19 July. As a result these plans I'm certain of having to ask in the near future other means essential to success" ⁽¹²⁾.

On the 50th Division had pointed out that the decision to send it to Cyprus stemmed from meticulous assessment of the facts. "*If I want-he added-I can show you detailed reasons which induced me to take such a decision and I made her seem indisputable. I hope that you will let me full freedom of action in decisions of this kind*" ⁽¹³⁾. At this point it became clear the need for a personal interview to clarify views and good programs. Auchinleck went to London stopped for a few days. Had contact with all higher military and civil authorities, he spent a *weekend* not courteous to *Chequers*, the country residence of Churchill, but not ceded an inch: the offensive was begun in November, would have been unprecedented in size until then, was conducted by Gen. Alan Cunningham, Commander of the East Africa Force until 29 August, and not from Wilson ⁽¹⁴⁾.

Shortly afterwards there arose another element of contrariety. He pointed out the emergence of certain frictions between different armed force commanders and even between Italians and Germans-less provocative than a State of tension certainly redundant-but we must not forget that it is always incidents occurred, especially during the wars of coalition. Are known

the numerous clashes in the Allied field caused by difficult character's personality and impulsive and painstakingly ironed. A part, even within the Commonwealth were frequent episodes that put to the test the tact and firmness of commanders in Chief: the Chief of the Australian contingent, New Zealand and South Africa, for example, on the one hand they had to obey the operational commander in Chief and any intermediate commanders, but from another responded to the respective country of use of the body of troops to their orders. Blamey and Freyberg had always fought against the use of fractional divisions and had used their right to contact their own Government, which had created the impression that the troops of the Dominions were privileged. After Greece's campaign and the fall of Crete, the Australian Government had seen Gen. Blamey take over as Deputy Commander in Chief of the Middle East. On the other hand, the New Zealand gave instructions to Freyberg of Wellington's Cabinet to allow, in the future, the ability to examine any of his doubts about the appropriateness of the orders received from the Commander in Chief. At the end of July, from the Australian part.

- Gen. Blamey to Auchinleck and the Canberra Government war cabinet-was proposed to replace the worn out the garrison of Tobruk. Between 19 and 29 August the 18th Brigade was, as well, the change by the Polish Brigade. However the new Dominion Government returned with heat on, essentially for reasons of domestic politics. Given the conditions of tiredness of the 9th Australian Division, it was feared a sudden collapse in the face of a vigorous Italian-German attempt. Therefore demanded the immediate withdrawal of the army. Auchinleck was now in London that he had planned to kick off *Crusader*-this was the formal name for the offensive in Cyrenaica. -in the first week of September. Now, the first phase of the replacement had shown the big risk looming on the ships, so the use of five fighter groups to the Commons was not sufficient to avoid air strikes of R. Aeronautica and the *Luftwaffe*. Since the last new moon period (16-26 October) coincided with the moment at which the maximum effort should be exerted to achieve air superiority, appeared obvious negative consequences of the operation, especially since very little time remained for agreements about the sortie of the garrison of the square. The Australian Government refused to give in and between 19 and 27 September had

place the replacement of the 24th Australian Brigade by part of the 16th Brigade British and the 4th Royal Tanks. Auchinleck was furious and went to manifest the desire to have the size, but it was useless. The third part of the evacuation was carried out between 12 and 25 October: the rest of the 9th Australian Division was vacated and remained only the 2/13th battalion, two companies of 2/15th and a core Division command. The fort was taken by Gen. R.M. Scobie, Commander of the 70th Division. The following figures summarize the effort supported by 11 April to November 10, 1941:

- men evacuated from Tobruk (including prisoners)..n. 47,280

- men transported to Tobruk n. 34,113

- materials transported to Tobruk 33,946 tons.

- warships or merchant ships lost no. 34

- warships or merchant ships damaged No. 33

At the same time, Garrison's losses amounted to 3,836, killed, wounded and missing (3,194 Australians, 509 British, 26 Indians and 107 poles).

While the new Commander in Chief in the Middle East gave to shuffle its operational tool, the new Commander-in-Chief of India had to solve an unexpected difficult politico-military situation. At the beginning of hostilities from part of the German, the Soviet Government, which up to then had watched impassively as happened on the Western front and in the Balkans, called for urgent help to Britain and the United States and especially asked, already in the summer of 1941, opening a second front in Northern France or Scandinavia ⁽¹⁵⁾. It was obvious the British inability to accept material as pretense, but Churchill well knew that as soon as "fixed" somehow the Soviet Union, Germany would not only spread in the Middle East but would have taken in very serious account of landing in the United Kingdom. So he immediately to establish an war alliance with Stalin and to begin a real contest of Soviet aid effort. In this context, it outlined the great use of a line of communication with the Second through Iran, where a substantial German mission was very active.

The more decided to take a course of action to immediately delete a dangerous outbreak was Wavell, under whose responsibility fell the Iraqi and Iranian theatres. On 17 July he telegraphed to the Ministry of war:

“(...) For the purposes of the defense of India it is absolutely essential that the Germans should be made immediately dislodge from Iran. If you do not manage to implement this, you are likely to repeat the facts that in Iraq we were able to dominate only narrowly. And essential that we gather our forces with Russian across Iran: If the current Government is not willing to afford it, you should replace it with a favorable (...)”⁽¹⁶⁾.

In London the issue was already under scrutiny. The heads of State showed greater employment-oriented, though there was no illusion: it would have been inevitable draw on the Middle East to complete the military action in Iran. Eden, on the other hand, highlighted the opportunity of a great caution against the Shah: *"we must not act diplomatically without military forces are needed, otherwise we will face a disaster."* And that it was necessary to intervene was determined by two considerations: avoid that Shah, who well knew the importance of the oil fields of Ahvaz and Khormanshah, take any action detrimental to Britain and be ready to occupy those deposits in the case of a Second military collapse before the Germans moved. Began a diplomatic and military coordination which culminated in a joint note Anglo-Soviet requesting, above all, the removal of all German subjects present in Iran in any way. Since the note had no satisfactory answer, decided upon military intervention beginning on August 25. The Soviet attack was led by Gen. Novikov. Altogether the forces were evaluated in three infantry divisions, one Cavalry, a motorized and various non-divisional units. From Azerbaijan a column occupied Maku and Khoi and, after leaving detachments to patrol the Northern Kurdistan, pointed on Täbriz and Ardebil, while another column descended, along the western shore of the Caspian Sea, to occupy Bandar Shah and Qazvin, to 150 kilometers from Tehran. On the other side of the Caspian Sea from Turkmenistan, a third column came in Bandar Shah, head of station trans-Iranian railway and continued on to Samnan about 200 kilometers east of the capital.

The British offensive, given to Gen. E.P. Guinan, was waged on two axes. To the South, towards the Abadan refineries and oil wells of Ahvaz, was carried out by the 8th Indian Division. Further north, from Khamaqiri, departments of the 10th Indian Division, the 2nd Indian Armored Brigade and 9th Armored Brigade reached Khormanshah deposits and Hamadan. The *Royal Air Force*, with seven groups, held

essentially a show of force, given the low resistance encountered. Meanwhile, the 5th Indian Division moved from the desert in Western Iraq and the British 6th Division was held in hand, ready to go if necessary. On the morning of 28 the armistice was signed. Entered a period of stasis and pressure on the Iranian Government, then, on 16 September, the Shah abdicated in favor of his son that announced its intention to “cooperate” with Britain and the USSR. On September 17 Russian and British troops entering Tehran, where they stayed for about a month. British troops were used in the construction of defensive features against a possible German aggression by Turkey or the Caucasus and installations for unloading and transporting of supplies for Russia from the Persian Gulf, as well as protection of communication lines.

Britain was thus secured a solid position of dominance in the Middle East, making the welding material with the Caucasus region; had placed away from any threat the rich oilfields of Iraq and Iran, which are essential for the continuation of the war; it was herald, eventually, to an extent to be able to effectively influence the attitude of Turkey. Now he was in a position to devote more effort to prepare decisive action in North Africa. Conversely, while in Russia the German armies encountered serious difficulties to lead beyond the Dnieper, these events were not weigh on Hitler's strategic guidelines, in the sense of abandoning any future project major offensive operations in the Mediterranean theater.

“*At that time-in September-I had more ambitious aims*” Churchill wrote. Taking advantage of the valuable loan of American cargo ships, decided to send as soon as possible to Egypt from 10 to 20,000 and, by Christmas, two British divisions and 80,000 other additions or non-divisional units. He had worked out a plan for the autumn 1941 and 1942. Defeated Rommel and conquered the French North Africa, Libya could be induced to break away from Vichy. In addition, delivered an Armored Division and three from the United Kingdom infantry in the Mediterranean, the possession of Malta and the acquiescence of France would be allowed to open a second front in Sicily (operation *Whipcord*). In Russia the German advance would be seriously undertaken and Italy, after the reverse in Libya, would have found it difficult to fight alone. When the Prime Minister learned of the postponement prompted by Auchinleck does not

failed to demonstrate a definite disappointment vigorously. "*It is impossible to make it clear to Parliament and to the country why our troops if they are stopped for four and a half months without engaging the enemy, and throughout this time Russia is invaded by all parties*" he observed with bitterness ⁽¹⁷⁾, but eventually had to accept that and subsequent movement of the date. As reported to the Minister of State in the Middle East on 25 October, was convinced that *Crusader* would provide the decisive victory. You couldn't know if Germany would have been so tied to the Russian front during the winter to disengage in any way, nor whether the situation of 1942 would offer more or fewer benefits for Great Britain. In his opinion "*by the end of December the favorable prospects will fade away for a very long time.*" Whereas the weakness of Hitler lived in aviation, became vitally importance engaging the *Luftwaffe* in conditions and simultaneously in different areas. In his long letter to Lyttelton explained:

“5. If before January we can ensure possession of the whole series of airports of Tripoli, Malta, Sicily and Sardinia, and we can occupy, it will create the possibility of powerful attacks and possibly decisive match against Italy, the weakest member of the axis, with bombers from the motherland and based at one of the airports of the aforementioned system. The lack of Italian airfields North of Sicily would make it possible to (...).

6. (...).

7. the repercussions of these successes in France and in French North Africa, including the arrival of British troops on the borders of Tunisia, could induce Weygand to act with all the other advantages that might ensue.

8. the basis of the above is of course the success of *Crusader*. You should greet with joy the great diversion of enemy forces, particularly airlines, which will provided it *Whipcord* takes place at the same time as *Acrobat* ⁽¹⁸⁾. Nothing can procure a greater security or disorient the enemy of the simultaneous appearance of a sudden large number of goals. This applies particularly for the few weeks that remain while the enemy is pulling Britain out of the front line Russian air forces in excess and is reequip them to employ elsewhere. As you will realize, with a slow advance in Libya, through carefully prepared and stages after securing of each step (and while nothing happens in other area), you will undoubtedly encounter furious resistance. Such a development would certainly operations the Germans any chance to bring heavy reinforcements in Sicily and to strengthen their domination in Italy. I hope that you, like me, the transience of the opportunity that we have and the shortness of the period of truce that there still remains (...).

9. (...).

10. for all those reasons, the close synchronization of *Crusader* and *Whipcord* seems highly desirable. On the other hand, we must realize that remaining inactive, Libya will not stagnate everywhere (...). Therefore, if you decide to abandon *Whipcord* , or an action that would make the place in French North Africa, at the invitation of France (...), you would need to start as soon as possible to prepare for the transfer to Russia of considerable strength (...).⁽¹⁹⁾.

The reception in Cairo the commanders in Chief made this strategic understanding was unfortunate: the import part attributed to the defense of the Middle East, not considered necessary nor can the invasion of Sicily. By far preferable to the occupation of Bisena. So the *Whipcord* project was abandoned. Churchill in his stead he proposed to the Committee of Chiefs of staff the operation *Gymnast*, i.e. a landing at Bisena or Casablanca, and all agreed. "*We therefore definitely decided-* wrote Churchill to Gen. Ismay *-to act according to the following sequence: Crusader, Acrobat and Gymnast. On this point there can be no waiver*"⁽²⁰⁾.

In Egypt it was thought only to the first of these operations. Three months passed between the return of Auchinleck from visiting London and early *Crusader*. Were three months of reorganization in all fields. Firstly, the overall situation in the Middle East and the rise of the forces induced to differentiate clearly the sectors of the theatre of operations, giving each of them a real army. North was formed the 9th Army (Gen. Maitland Wilson), the West (Gen. Alan Cunningham). On the rear of each, a "base area and lines of communications"⁽²¹⁾: Palestine and Transjordan to the 9th Army and in Egypt the 8th. The preparation of the latter-which we'll had virtually held in September-October. The command of the Western Army was formed the next 8 September and the 27th changed its name to 8th Army. At the same time, the *Western Desert Force* became the 13th Corps and Gen. Alfred Godwin-Austen took command. On October 2 was construed the command of Second Army Corps of which was to frame the mass armor, originally called K Corp and entrusted to Gen. V.V. Pope, good connoisseur of armored vehicles. Three days later, however, Pope having lost his life, in a plane crash, the job was assigned to Gen. Willoughby Norrie. On 21 October the K Corp took the name 30th Corps.

Creating a strong tool that can compete with the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* was naturally of utmost importance. Auchinleck had asked the availability of at least two, if not three, but the armored divisions had been sent only 22nd Armored Brigade of the 1st Armored Division (whose bulk was scheduled to arrive in early 1942). That is more to do with what he had. The reordering of the 7th Armored Division was based on the allocation of all the old *cruisers* to the 7th Armored Brigade, leaving concentrated in 22nd Armored Brigade the new *Crusader* ⁽²²⁾. The second piece of the Armored Corps, the 4th Armored Brigade ⁽²³⁾, was equipped with the American M 3 Tanks, named *Stuart* ⁽²⁴⁾. With the infantry Tanks were equipped with the 1st Tank Brigade (equipped with *Valentine*), awarded to 13th Corp, and the 32nd Tank Brigade (equipped with *Matilda*, but also of *cruisers*), established in Tobruk ⁽²⁵⁾. Altogether five Brigades' saw between them fourteen regiments (= battalions): nine of Royal Tank, two Armored Cavalry and three *yeomanry*. Since the failure of operation *Battleaxe* was also due to poor training level shown by the armored forces, Auchinleck, who did not intend to repeat similar incident, he resisted--as seen--every solicitation of Churchill. The late arrival from Britain of the 22nd Armored Brigade to him therefore to move the start of the offensive to 11 November; then it was discovered that the *Crusader* of that Brigade took some work of adaptation and the date was moved to the 15th; Finally, training needs of the 1st South African Division, powered by difficulties, resulted in a new slip, the last at 18 November ⁽²⁶⁾.

The new tanks instilled high hopes. The *Stuart* light tank (12.5 tons)-initially used by the English as medium-weighted of course less than *Crusader I* (19 tons), but you could consider armor nearly identical (38 versus 40 mm) and the initial velocity of his 37-piece was slightly lower than that of the 2 pounders. It was also the fastest tank that existed in Africa (58 km/h against the *Crusader* 42) ⁽²⁷⁾.

The most urgent measure was to create a border guard who would proceed to the Organization of the army and logistics arrangements with a certain tranquility. It was this cover that allowed Auchinleck to absorb the operation *Sommernachtstraum*. In August the screen had been laid out by the 22nd Brigade in the Guard of the coastal sector and

from the 7th support group on the plateau. In September the 4th Indian Division picked up gradually its three Brigades (5th, 7th and 11th) between Sidi Barrani and Bir Misheifa, chosen as head of the westward extension of the railway from Marsa Matruh ⁽²⁸⁾. More on the back to Marsa Matruh, it constituted the 7th Armored Division.

The first order of Auchinleck to Cunningham dates back to September 2:

“1. (...) I decided to launch an offensive in the autumn in order to chase the enemy from North Africa.

2. the offensive will be conducted in two phases. First phase: conquest of Cyrenaica. Second phase: conquest of Tripolitania: First phase:

3. (...)Your immediate goal is the destruction of the enemy's armored forces, so as to facilitate the occupation of Cyrenaica and the subsequent conquest of Tripolitania.

4. an attack must be launched as soon as the necessary forces have been trained and collections and logistical ultimate predispositions. I believe that these conditions occur in early November; every effort should therefore be made to avoid the need for a referral (...).”

To deceive your opponent about the direction of the main effort, initial deployment of troops had to go from the coast at Giarabub. Roughly there were two operational hypothesis: the main effort exercised along the Giarabub-Gialo and beyond, to cut off the retreat of the enemy, and pressure, regulated by contemporary circumstances along the coastline or the main effort along the coast, with diversionary actions further South. “*Prepare a detailed plan for each of these hypotheses, with your comments, to be presented upon request by 1st October*” prescribed Auchinleck, closing of letter pointed to the forces available for the first phase ⁽²⁹⁾: a Corps Command, a command of armored Corps, an armored Division, a Tank Brigade, a Corps Command, four infantry divisions, of which at least two motorized, two Brigades of infantry and garrison of Tobruk ⁽³⁰⁾.

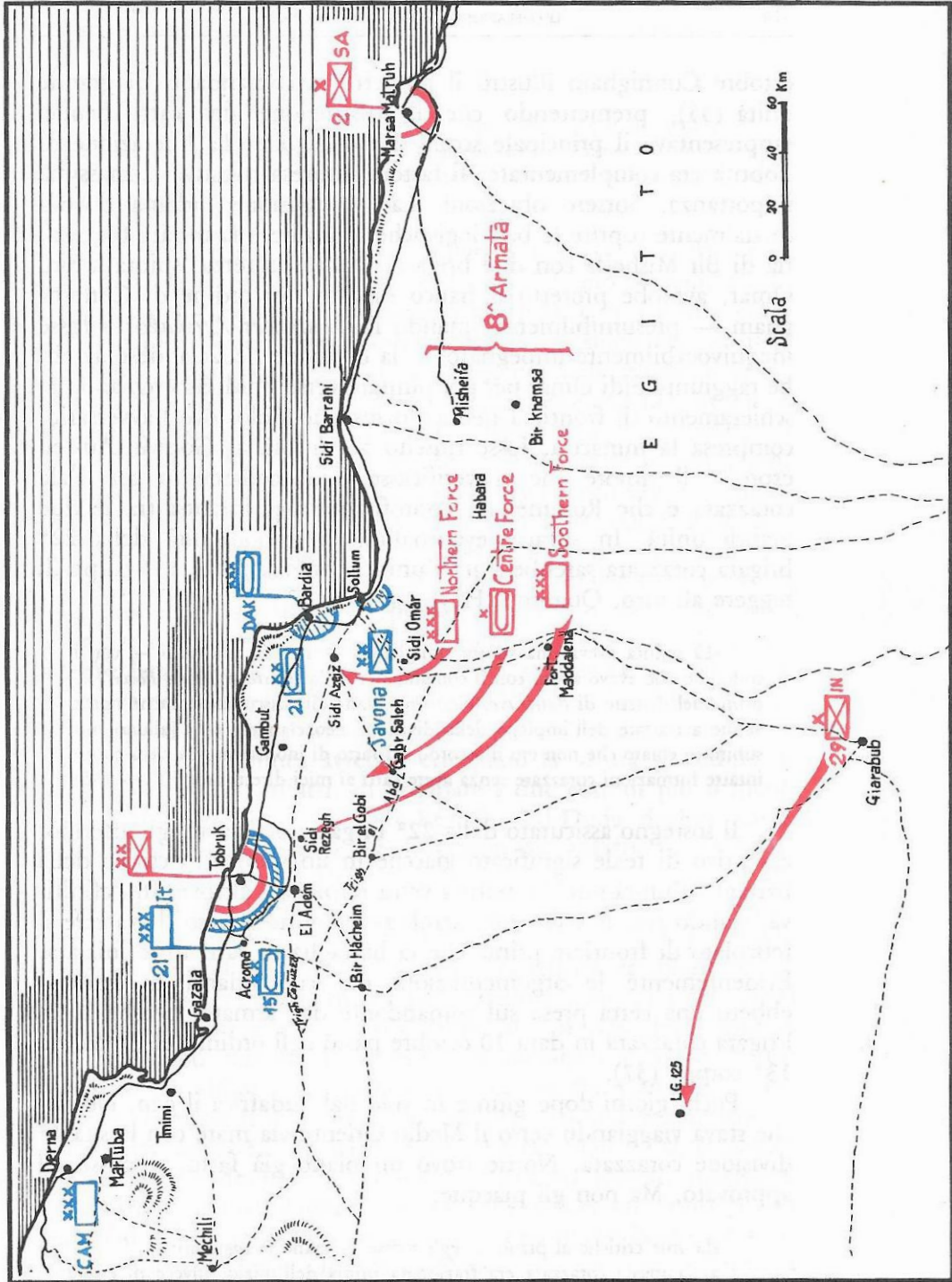
Cunningham examined news on axis troops (in principle correspond to reality, apart from the location of the 15th *Panzerdivision*, held to the South-West of Tobruk while actually East) and calculated a British superiority in Tanks of 6 to 4 and adversary in 3 planes at 2. In terms of supplies, sheets of Bastico in November allegedly were allowed three months to land operations and a month of aerial operations. This place. He studied the two working hypotheses.

The advance en masse toward Benghazi through the desert did not attract at all: it could lead to a withdrawal of Rommel, is true, but could also have to leave things as they were, being German-Italian forces certainly have a good autonomy. In this case, where it was decided to attack them, time and surprise would be lost; If instead you had agreed to continue on Benghazi or Ajdabiya, this would result in a difficult and exhausting marches, but especially the subdivision of armored forces and air support, the subjection to increasing offenses and excessive and vulnerable supplies axis elongation the latter led to the certainty of a decisive tank battle, as if Rommel had avoided withdrawing would allowed the release of Tobruk. *"Our initial design, therefore, should not go beyond the relief of Tobruk and the destruction of the armored forces in Cyrenaica. The plan for the capture of Benghazi must derive from success previously"* said Cunningham. In the unlikely event that some enemy armored units were able to escape, there is would be adjusted according to circumstances; otherwise the conquest of Western Cyrenaica would have been quick and easy. In relation to the known Italian-German deployment and evaluated the possible attack routes, the plan, in its general lines, rested on the use coordinated by three columns (sketch No. 38). The *Southern Force* consisting of the Armored Corps ⁽³¹⁾, was from South of fort Magdalena and point to Tobruk to destroy enemy armored forces in that area and leave the fort, with the concurrence of a sortie of the garrison. The *Center Force*, consisting of a reinforced Brigade ⁽³²⁾, was to proceed from fort Magdalene to the Northwest with the task of preventing opposing interference on North and South columns. When meeting with superior enemy forces had pushed-southward, so as to allow the Armored Corps with clear numerical superiority. The *Northern Force*, i.e. 13th Corp ⁽³³⁾, was to isolate Bardia-Sollum -Sidi Omar and sweep the area between the border and Tobruk. Later would eliminate the pockets of resistance that remain between Bardia and Sidi Omar.

Proposals for Cunningham ⁽³⁴⁾ were accepted by the Commander in Chief, that Rommel probably would concentrate his two *Panzerdivisions* South of fort Capuzzo to counter-attack the Armored Corps. On 6

PROGETTO INIZIALE PER L'OPERAZIONE «CRUSADER»
con le notizie disponibili sulle forze dell'Asse
(28 settembre 1941)

Schizzo n. 38



October Cunningham illustrated the project to the large unit commanders ⁽³⁵⁾, premise that destruction of enemy Tanks was the main goal to be achieved. The relief of Tobruk was complementary. The surprise factor was of utmost importance. Objections arose. The 4th Indian Division had to initially cover the advanced logistics bases and Bir Misheifa railway head with two Brigades, while the third, push on Sidi Omar, would protect the exposed flank. On Cunningham's order — presumably when the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* was unequivocally committed to the New Zealand Division would reach Sidi Omar then pointing northward, encircling the enemy frontier or purse, where the opponent, including threat, he managed to break away. Godwin-Austen expressed the fear that there is a disconnect with the armored wing and that it would take to put Rommel among two large units. In such an eventuality, the availability of the 22nd Armored Brigade was the only hope for the 13th Corps to hold one. As for Freyberg:

“The seat had a close peers-remembered later – with the conversation I'd had with the Commander of the *Western Desert Force* (...) before the disaster of *Battleaxe*. Not taken part in the discussion until it was dealing with the use of the New Zealand Division (...) [then] I immediately made it clear that I was not agree to intrude blindly against intact armored formations without direct orders to my tanks (...)” ⁽³⁶⁾.

The support provided by the 22nd Armored Brigade, he said, was devoid of real meaning since at a critical moment of the battle the unit could be used elsewhere. Ultimately, in those circumstances, it did not seem appropriate to cross the frontier grid before the battle of the tanks was started. Evidently, the arguments of the infantry commanders had a grip on the Commander of the army, because the 4th Armored Brigade on 10 October passed the orders of 13 Corps Command ⁽³⁷⁾.

A few days after he arrived in flight from South Africa Gen. Norrie, who was traveling to the Middle East by sea with his 1st Armored Division. Norrie had a plan already, discussed and approved. But it pleased him:

My criticisms of the plan - he wrote-were as follows:

a) armored mass was split before the start, instead of being concentrated under one command.

b) would have been much better directing 30 Corps to towns forced the enemy to battle. Gabr Saleh offered no particular reason to induce the enemy to attack us, had tactical value. I suggested that we would do better to threaten the opponent's lines of communication at Sidi Rezegh since the order «next», and thus retain the initiative (...)»⁽³⁸⁾.

Speaking of the issue on October 15, Cunningham in the first operational meeting which he participated. Also present were Gen. Ronald Scobie, Commander of the fort of Tobruk, and Gen. George Brink, Commander of the 1st South African Division, agreed to make arrangements on the sortie of the garrison in Tobruk. According to the plan, the first move was to bring 30 Corps in the area of Gabr Saleh, 64 kilometers southeast of el Adem and almost as many by Bardia, in order to be able to go on-Tobruk and Bardia in relation to events. Which events, then, consisted in the first move of Rommel's replication? In any case, Cunningham wanted to stay with 30 Corps command, to be able to take quickly the choice on the second move. If, as hoped, the enemy had come to Gabr Saleh and had hired the fight, 30th Corps would beat the *Panzer* thanks to their numerical superiority and then would attack with the 1st South African Division Italian forces that surrounded the siege to the Southeast, while the British 70th Division would have made the sortie on the orders of Norrie. It was, in fact, to occupy the two more or less parallel ridges of ed Duda and Sidi Rezegh. Ed-Duda had to be reached by the Sidi Rezegh and garrisoned by South Africans. After that Italian forces were beaten to the West.

On 21 October, at the next Conference of Corps commanders, Norrie put on the table the ambiguous position of 4th Armored Brigade. The *Center Force*, as such, was missing from the plan but the 4th Armored Brigade was still placed in the space between the two Corps to give security to 13th Corps, from which it depended, at least for a first time. In fact, considering the passage of a hundred kilometers between fort Campbell and Bir el Gobi, the divergent action of two large British units in that way and the theft of a third armored forces expected and desired battle; there were reasonable grounds for concern. Godwin-Austen insisted to conserve under his control the use of the 4th Armored Brigade until the threat of the *Panzer* had been eliminated. Norrie, conversely, argued that the presence of 30^o Corp alone was enough to give

quiet south side of Godwin-Austen, therefore even the simple temporarily take for granted will be shown in Brigade is translated in a dispersion of forces. Cunningham, there and then, confirmed the constraint for the Brigade but later sent a message to Godwin-Austen, returning on the subject. He had just had a further conversation with Norrie and with Gen. Gott, Commander of the 7th Armored Division, the other point of the plan that they persuaded the move to Gabr Saleh to attend the German reaction. It was better to bet directly on Sidi Rezegh, i.e. on Tobruk, thus provoking the tank battle? Gott even was declared ready to move on el-Adem alone, also devoid of the 4th Armored Brigade. Now, without getting to this, you could find a compromise by playing on the times 13th Corp would have succumbed to the 4th Armored Brigade and delayed the lapping area Bardia-Sidi Omar, so the armored mass would have had more chance of success. On the other part "*with the 7th Armored Division processing right on Tobruk, it is highly unlikely that more than one Armored Division can be used against you and what you should be able to get by*" Cunningham remarked to Godwin-Austen ⁽³⁹⁾. The initial design of forcing's *Panzergruppe* into accepting combat under conditions of inferiority seemed could change in the concept of a resolute advance "*right on Tobruk*". And not just the 30th Corps, but the entire army would have banked on the fort, with the 7th Armored Division as spearhead and the support of infantry, Tanks and big well-kept infantry unit in hand. In front of Tobruk the stretch between the positions of el-Adem and ed Duda would enable conclusive victory. The various opinions and the different suggestions buzzed around Cunningham, but remained firm at the first idea: that all 13th Corp should check the enemy advanced positions while the decisive battle was fought elsewhere. Thus, at the meeting of 29 October, Godwin-Austen went on to accept the risk that he would represent the unavailability of 4th Armored Brigade (from the day before passed to 30th Corp), and declared himself in favor of 30 Corps advance "*right on Tobruk*". Own part, was willing to meet with organic means the rate of armored units that the enemy had turned against him.

Cunningham was still undecided. "*I formed a corps of infantry and one armored*", took over, although the articulation

He wasn't so stiff, and "*I was wondering if this was the most suitable training. Another alternative would have been to form mixed groups*" ⁽⁴⁰⁾. Changed thinking and

"advanced the hypothesis that the 7th Armored Division could face enemy armored forces alone and were then able to reach Tobruk. He said that we should not then could hold it. Our armored forces were to assume a central position on the battlefield. If the enemy, observed the unfolding of events, had decided to pick resistance, would have to concentrate his armored forces to defend Bardia or Tobruk, or divide them. If the enemy had divided, we would have divided (...). If the enemy had tried to evade, we couldn't have cut it out even focusing directly on Tobruk" ⁽⁴¹⁾.

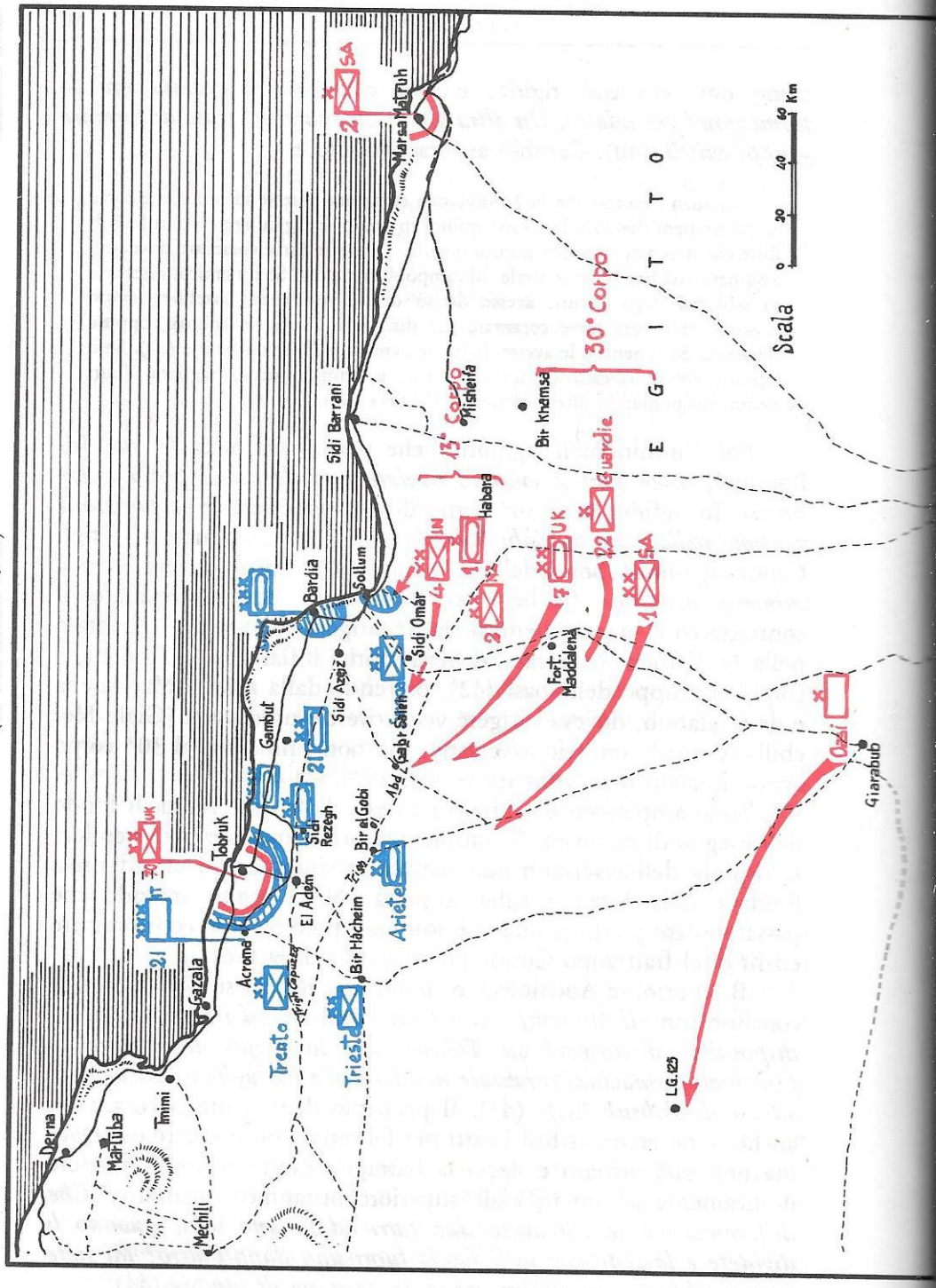
Then Cunningham added that "*the first evening his [Rommel] intentions are revealed and the decision will be taken.*" In short: 30 Corps was to take "*a central location in the area of Gabr Saleh, and push armored cars on the Trigh Capuzzo, until the edges of the plateau; 13 Corps had «do the absolute minimum»*" until it had been properly identified enemy armored counter-attack; the 4th Armored Brigade, framed in the 7th Armored Division, was to cover the exposed flank of 13th Corps; the OASIS Group ⁽⁴²⁾, leaving from Redoubt Maddalena and was directing West Giarabub and Northwest (Gialo-Mechili) against the opposing backline, but not before 30th Corps had started the movement on Tobruk: (sketch No. 39).

Are widely evident reflection of the underlying uncertainty in the maneuver. The make the first move and then wait for the response of the opponent does not seem in tune with an offensive force and based on surprise. In reality it happened that it took three days before that Rommel took countermeasures, and in the meantime Cunningham hesitated to do.

On 30 October Auchinleck compiled a 'Note' on *Crusader*, which ended with "*30th Corp with all cruisers and American Tanks available it will direct on Tobruk in order to induce the main armored formations into battle and destroy the enemy East of Tobruk (...)*" ⁽⁴³⁾. The principle of a armor, although they were excluding infantry Tanks, wanted to be seen but not be implemented and after the battle Rommel may request ironically to a superior officer captured British: "*what's the difference if you have two tanks and I one, when you divide them and let me make them out one after another? I have come down with three Brigades in succession of times*" ⁽⁴⁴⁾.

PIANO DEFINITIVO PER L'OPERAZIONE «CRUSADER» E ORDINI INIZIALI
con le notizie disponibili sulle forze dell'Asse
(17 novembre 1941)

Schizzo n. 39



2. The preliminaries of *Crusader* (November 1941).

In relation to maneuver, Cunningham had granted the protagonist's part to the 30th Corps. In particular starts, the 7th Armored Division (Gen. Gott) was to advance towards the Northwest, find and destroy enemy armored forces. On your right, at the 4th Armored Brigade (Gen. GateHouse) was the result of security alongside exposed 13th Corp. The 1st South African Division (Gen. Brink), on the left, had the task of protecting communication lines initially of the 7th Armored Division against provenances from the West and, subsequently, to occupy Sidi Rezegh Ridge. On the rear, the 22nd Guards Brigade (Gen. Marriot) was in charge of giving protection to the rear of the Corps and field depots. 13th Corps had to face German-Italian frontier defenses, involving them with the 4th Indian Division (Gen. Messervy) and isolated with the 2nd New Zealand Division (Gen. Freyberg); in the second half, eliminated this advanced line, you would be directed to the West. Further South, the Oasis Group (Gen. Reid) was to keep possession of the oasis of Giarabub with a part of the 29th Indian Brigade and, with the bulk and 6th South African armored car Regiment occupy Gialo. In the army reserve, the 2nd South African Division (Gen. de Villiers). At midnight on 17 November the concentration of the British 8th Army's was complete (see picture of battle page following): approx. 118,000 men were ready to move.

Hand in hand with the Organization tactic had been materialized the logistical apparatus. By Marsa Matruh, train most advanced railhead, a 160-kilometer run to Sollum Crow and about 230 to fort Maddalena. They were just thinking, why the effort wouldn't have gravitated along the coastline and therefore would not have allowed the use of Speos Artemidos, Bardia and Halfaya, nor of the road Marsa Martuh-Bardia. In addition, 30th Corps had to fight in a desert area, by 70 to 120 km beyond the border. Finally, the battle was planned by Tanks, i.e. would involve strong fuel efficiency and made necessary the immediate availability of supplies, worth stopping the maneuver.

The first problem to be solved was therefore moving westward, Bir Misheifa, of the railhead, provision ended, as mentioned above, a few days before the start of the offensive. The second point concerned the extension

ORDER OF BATTLE FOR THE 8 th ARMY FOR OPERATION <i>CRUSADER</i>	
<p>Commander: Gen. Sir Alan Cunningham Chief of staff: Gen. A. Galloway</p>	
<p>13th Corps (Gen. A.R. Godwin-Austen): 4th Indian Division (Gen. F. w. Messervy) with: 5th Indian Brigade (Gen. D. Russell); 7th Indian Brigade (Gen. H.R. Briggs); 11th Indian Brigade (Gen. A. Anderson); Divisional units including: <i>Central India Horse</i>, <i>New Zealand Cavalry Regiment</i>, three artillery regiments by the campaign; a heavy field artillery regiment; two regiments against wagons; two anti-aircraft regiments.</p>	
<p>2nd New Zealand Division (Gen. B.C. Freyberg) with: 4th New Zealand Brigade (Gen. L.M. Inglis); 5th New Zealand Brigade (Gen.). Hargest); 6th New Zealand Brigade (Gen. H.E. Barrowclough); Divisional units including: 27th machine-gun battalion; 28th Maori Battalion; three artillery regiments by the campaign; a Anti-Tank Regiment; a Anti-Aircraft Regiment.</p>	
<p>1st Tank Brigade (Gen. H.R.B. Watkins).</p>	
<p>Corps Support: two field heavy artillery regiments; an anti-tank artillery regiment; a heavy anti-aircraft Regiment; three light anti-aircraft batteries.</p>	
<p>30th Corps (Gen. W. M. Norrie): 7th Armored Division (Gen. W.H.E. Gott) with: 7th Armored Brigade (Gen. G. M. O. Davy); 22nd Armored Brigade (Gen.). Scott-Cockburn); 7th Support Group (Gen. J.C. Campbell); Divisional units including: 11th Hussars (Armored Cars); 1st <i>King's Dragoon Guards</i> (Armored cars); 4th <i>South African Armored Cars</i> (Armored cars);</p>	
<p>1st South African Division (Gen. G.E. Brink) with: 1st South African Brigade (Gen. D.H. Pienaar); 5th South African Brigade (Gen. B.F. Armstrong);</p>	

Divisional units including:
a reconnaissance battalion;
a machine-gun battalion;
two artillery regiments by the campaign;
a heavy field artillery regiment;
a anti-tank regiment;
an anti-aircraft Regiment.
22nd Guards Brigade (Gen. I.C.O. Marriott).
4th Armored Brigade (Gen. A.H. Gatehouse).
Corps Support.

Army units:
2nd South African Division (Gen. I. P. de Villiers) with:
3rd South African Brigade (Gen. C. E. Borain);
4th South African Brigade (Gen. A.A. Haiton);
6th South African Brigade (Gen. F.W. Cooper);
Divisional units including:
a reconnaissance battalion;
a machine-gun battalion;
three artillery regiments campaign.

OASIS Group (Gen. D. W. Reid) with:
29th Indian Brigade (Gen. D. W. Reid);
6th South African Armored Cars;
7th South African Armored Cars
73rd against artillery wagons;
6th light anti-aircraft artillery;
a campaign battery.

The garrison of Tobruk (Gen. R.M. Scobie):
British 70th Division (Gen. R.M. Scobie) on:
14th Infantry Brigade (Gen. B.H. Chappel);
16th Infantry Brigade (Gen. C.E.N. Larman);
23rd Infantry Brigade (Gen. C.H. V. Cox);
1st Polish Brigade (Gen. S. Kopanski);
32nd Tank Brigade (Gen. A. C. Willison);
Divisional units including:
1st *Northumberland Fusiliers*.
ten batteries by campaign;
four anti-tank batteries;
four light anti-aircraft batteries;
three heavy anti-aircraft batteries;
two batteries from the coast.

Marsa Matruh garrison (Gen. W.H.E. Poole):
1st South African Brigade (Gen. W.H.E. Poole),
various units including:
a campaign artillery regiment;
a light anti-aircraft Regiment;
a heavy anti-aircraft Regiment.

Long Range Desert Group (Lt. col. G.I. Prendergast).

Alexandria aqueduct and Daba until Misheifa, and even that was completed for the 13 November. The third problem consisted in the installation of advanced bases for groupings of forces. A was formed near Sidi Barrani to the 4th Indian Division and, in General, for all troops operating in the coastal sector (sketch n° 40). A second base was provided at Bir Thalata, just west of Bir Misheifa, for 30th Corp and a good part of 13th. A third was built near Giarabub for *Oasis* Group. The computation of requirements for the first week of operations led to reach 32,000 tons of materials, including 25,000 at Thalata. The reference to the initial seven day depended on the hope of freeing Tobruk within that time frame, and then you can quickly use the fort as supply head by sea. To the West of advanced bases were prepared *Field Maintenance Centers* (emergency supply centers): four for 30th Corps and two for the 13th (45).

In terms of the availability of logistics port of Tobruk has a strong value; since would have allowed an enormous fuel savings and time. It had been carefully planned the maritime supply lines, boost up in Benghazi. Three days after the release of Tobruk was to get the first convoy from Alexandria, organized by the *Inshore Squadron*. From, then every day would be landed, 500 tons of fuel, part in drums, and 600 tons of various material.

Soon conquered Benghazi, Derna and port companies of the Royal Navy had to release the mines and ports from obstructions and prepare to receive respectively 200 and 600 tones per day.

Against the British 8th Army the Italian Comando Superiore opposed two large complex units: the *Panzergruppe Afrika* and the Maneuvering Corps (see order of battle the following pages). In practice, the battle was entrusted to the first, since the second, who had ceded the *Trento* for the attack on Tobruk, acted as a strategic reserve. The articulation of the various requirements ordered scrapped replied: border security, guaranteed by an Italian-German static-array supplied by *Savona* Inf. Div. and an part of the *Afrika* Division; blockade of Tobruk the Italian XXI Corps; conquest of Tobruk is assigned to two Italian divisions of XXI Corps and German *Deutsches Afrikakorps* two; first responders against possible British offensive entrusted initially

ORDER OF BATTLE OF <i>PANZERGRUPPE</i> AFRIKA'S ON 17 NOVEMBER 1941	
<p>Commander: Gen. Erwin Rommel Chief of staff: Gen. Alfred Gause</p> <p><i>Deutsches Afrikakorps</i> (Gen. L. Crüwell): 15th <i>Panzerdivision</i> (Gen. W. Neumann-Silkow) with: 8th <i>Panzeregiment</i> (Lt. col. Cramer); 115th <i>Schützen</i> Regiment (*); 200th <i>Schützen</i> Regiment (*); 33rd recon group; 33rd motorized artillery regiment; 33rd <i>Panzerjäger</i> group; Smaller units and services</p> <p>21st <i>Panzerdivision</i> (Gen. J. von Ravenstein) with: 5th <i>Panzeregiment</i>, (Lt. col. Stephan); 104th <i>Schützen</i> Regiment; 3rd recon group; 155th motorized artillery regiment; 605th <i>Panzerjäger</i> group, 39th <i>Panzerjäger</i> group, Smaller units and services.</p> <p><i>Afrika</i> Division (Gen. M. Sümmermann) (**) with: 155th motorized infantry regiment; II/255th motorized infantry (***); II/347th motorized infantry (***); 300th OASIS battalion of; 900th sappers battalion; 2nd Quick artillery regiment (Italian); II/115th motorized artillery; Smaller units and services.</p> <p>55th <i>Savona</i> Inf. Div. (Gen. F. De Giorgis) with: 15th infantry regiment; 16th infantry regiment; 12th artillery regiment; Divisional units including: CLV machine-gun battalion; IV squadrons group <i>Genoa Cavalleria</i>; 300th Oasis battalion (German).</p>	
<p>(*) grouped in 15th <i>Schützen</i> Brigade (**) then 90th Light Division. (***) constituting the 361st infantry regiment <i>Afrika</i>.</p>	

XXI Corps (Gen. E. Navarini):

17th Pavia Inf. Div. (Gen. A. Fernandes) with:

27th infantry regiment;

28th infantry regiment;

26th artillery regiment;

Divisional units including:

VI squadrons group *Lancieri Aosta*;

V light Tank battalion;

25th Bologna Inf. Div. (Gen. A. Gloria) with:

39th infantry regiment;

40th infantry regiment;

205th artillery regiment;

Divisional units.

27th *Brescia* Inf. Div. (Gen. B. Gioda) with:

19th infantry regiment;

20th infantry regiment;

1st quick artillery regiment;

Divisional units including:

XXVII machine-gun battalion.

102^a *Trento* Mot. Div. (Gen. G. De Stefanis) (*)with:

61st infantry regiment;

62nd infantry regiment;

7th bersaglieri Regiment;

46th artillery regiment;

Divisional units including:

DLI anti-tank battalion against

Corps Support:

3rd quick artillery regiment;

16th grouping of artillery corps;

24th grouping Corps artillery;

5th Army artillery group;

8th Corps artillery group;

340th border guard artillery group;

XXXI sappers battalion.

Services of Corps.

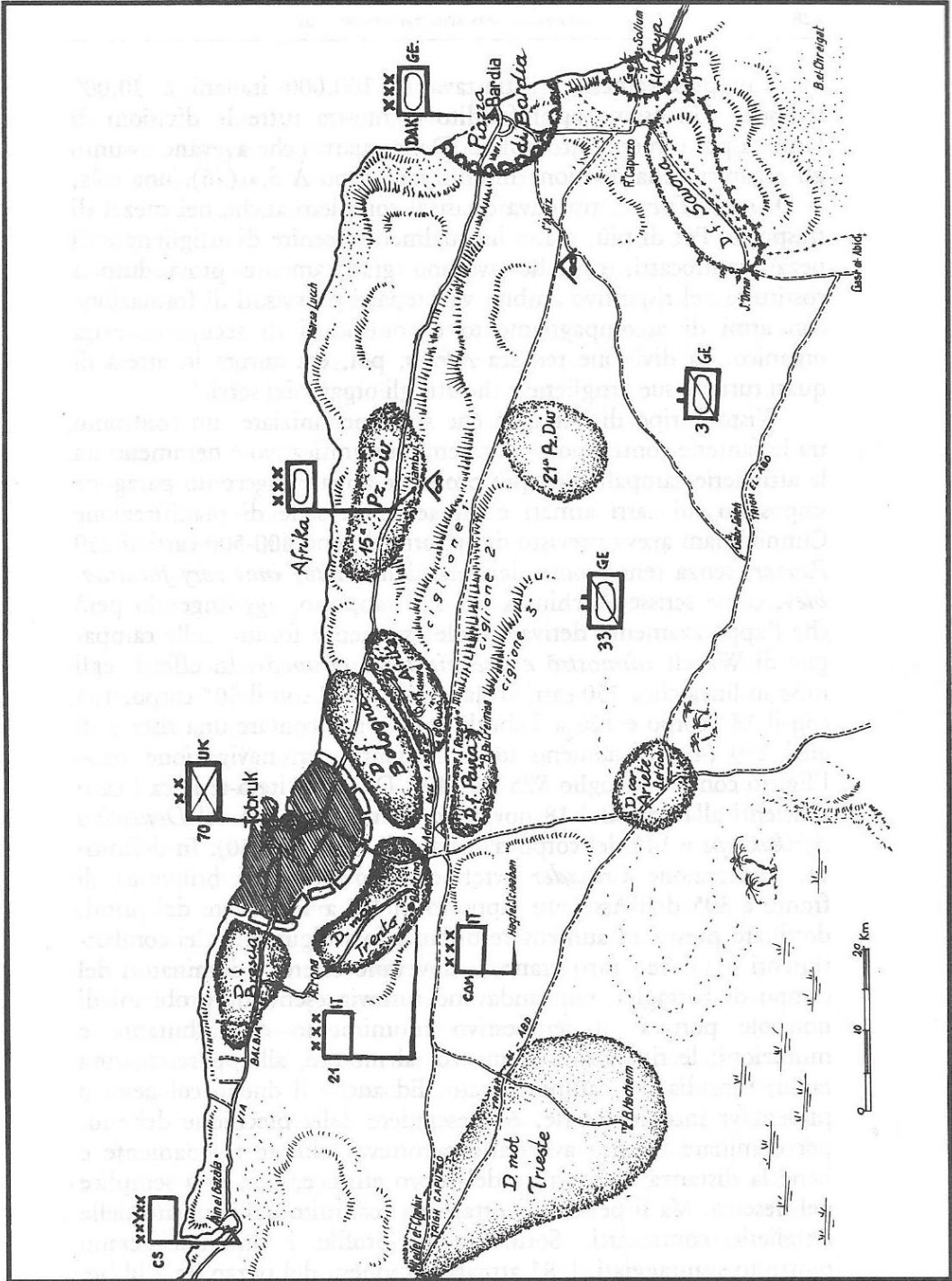
(*) Ceded to the attack on Tobruk by C.A.M.

ORDER OF BATTLE OF THE CORP OF MANOEUVRE ON 17 NOVEMBER 1941	
<p>Commander: Gen. Gastone Gambara Chief of staff: Lt. Col. Carlo Scaglia.</p>	
<p>132nd <i>Ariete</i> Arm. Div. (Gen. M. Balotta) with: 8th bersaglieri Regiment; 132nd Medium tank Regiment; 32nd light tank Regiment; 132nd artillery regiment; Divisional units including: a group of 75/27 of the <i>Pavia</i> Inf. Div.; a group of 105/28 of 24th Group Army Corps.</p>	
<p>101st <i>Trieste</i> Mot. Div. (Gen. A. Piazzoni) with: 65th infantry regiment; 66th infantry regiment; 9th bersaglieri Regiment; 21st Artillery Regiment; Divisional units including: DVII accompanying weapons and anti-tank battalion</p>	
<p>Recon Grouping (Col. De Meo) with: a group of Young Fascists battalions (two btg.); P.A.I battalion. " R. Gessi » LII M 13 battalion (in training); III/32nd light tanks; an armored car company and 6 L chariots (experimental); a machine-gun company; flying batteries Group with: I and III group from 65/17; autonomous battery from 65/17; a battery 100/17; a battery 20 mm..</p>	
<p>Corps Support: three batteries from 102/35 of Milmart (the <i>Ariete</i> Arm. Div. reinforcement); a battalion of engineers motorized G; 67th O.A. group (less a squadron).</p>	

the 21st *Panzerdivision*: control of large space between Sidi Omar and Bir el Gobi attributed to two recon groups, 3rd and 33rd, of *Panzerdivisionen* (see. Sketch No. 41). The Mauouver Corps had *Ariete* Arm Div., concentrated at Bir el Gobi; *Trieste* Mot. Div., located on broad front between Bir Hakeim and el-Chebir, Mteifel on the Trigh Capuzzo, and recon, grouping still at Bena, on *Jebel*.

LO SCHIERAMENTO ITALO-TEDESCCO
alla data del 17 novembre

Schizzo n. 41



Altogether it was 100,000 Italians and 70,000 Germans. Close examination shows us all infantry divisions more or less incomplete. Of the four who had taken on the organic motorized Division's "type A.S." ⁽⁴⁶⁾ one, Trieste Mot. Div. was almost fully booked well in means of transport. What's more, were poorly equipped with artillery and anti-tank guns, which had gradually been set up in the respective context various units with training weapons provisional accompanying and recovered anti-tank, extra staff. German *Afrika Division*, then, was still waiting for almost all of his artillery and all services.

Having regard to the type of battle that was about to begin, a comparison of the opposing infantry doesn't seem meaningful and neither even the field artillery. Far more probative instead a comparison appears set on tanks and planes. When planning Cunningham had planned to oppose at least 400-500 to 250 *Panzer* tanks, regardless of the tanks of *Ariete*, "*not very formidable*," as he wrote in his report Auchinlek, adding, however, that appreciation is derived from the experiences provided by the campaigns of Wavell "proved to be quite mistaken. " In fact, he got in line about 750 tanks, of which 477 with 30th Corp, 135 with 13th Corps and 126 at Tobruk ⁽⁴⁷⁾, not counting a reserve of another 259 ⁽⁴⁸⁾ and at least 50 sailing toward Egypt with convoy WS 12 ⁽⁴⁹⁾. From the German-Italian efficient wagons on 18 November were 395: 249 of the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* and 146 of the maneuvering Corps ⁽⁵⁰⁾. Ultimately, the operation *Crusader* would place 612 British tanks front 395 Axis: a ratio of 1.8 to 1 in favor of the first, intended soon to rise during the course of the fighting ⁽⁵¹⁾. If the tanks were, or should have been, the rulers of the battlefield, however, would not be exempt from considerable capacity problems: the timely supply of fuel and ammunition; repairs to the vehicle, the engine, the radio equipment; the pitfall of minefield. And the duel with the enemy had unknowns' series. Regardless of the accuracy of the shot, to eliminate the opponent to evaluate quickly and well the opening distance of effective fire, which is not easy in the desert. But the mortal danger was the ambush of the anti-tank artillery. In this regard, the British were quite disadvantaged. The 8th Army had 2 lbs piece (by 40 mm) anti-tank gun is unique, and that from 25 pounds

(from 88/27) that how many cannon was giving good results in anti-tank action. These Germans opposed the old pieces from 37/45, new from 50/60, which had already shown their validity during operation *Battleaxe*, and those, now famous, by 88 mm anti-aircraft. The Italians had the gunner from 20, just 37/45 pieces ceded by Germany and modest 47/32 guns. The effectiveness of such weapons depended to a large extent by the initial velocity and the type of projectile and about 88 pieces ⁽⁵²⁾ and 50 ⁽⁵³⁾ Germans were offering better performance, since with a slightly higher initial speed combined with a armor-piercing projectile-piercing CAP that allowed a higher penetration capabilities ⁽⁵⁴⁾.

In addition to armored transport vehicles were rotated. It can be said that almost all motor vehicles were focusing to combat in Marmarica or to feed the battle. To a thousand total therefore needed tanks add something like 30,000 vehicles: about 20,000 British and 10,000 German-Italian. An infinite number of points during the day across the stony soil and plate night raccogliantisi to refuel and to defend themselves. The formations now taken by armoured and motorized troops translated into multiple, long cascading columns to widely separated vehicles to avoid detection by the air navigation. In this desert navigation became inevitable that vehicles temporarily stop goods for damage and even whole units lagged behind to lose orientation, so that the meetings with the enemy were sudden and control their units very often arduous. Moreover, even tactical reconnaissance aircraft had no easy task: not only the difficulties of finding safe reference points were valid as well for them, but the clouds of sand lifted movements often did not allow the identification of larger units, especially since both opponents had begun to extensively use captured war material. Furthermore, the appreciation of the losses inflicted on enemy armored formations was objectively problematic. Unless a means to go up in flames or had the turret removed, it could not acquire the certainty that the tank hit was definitely out. Very often, during the night or to fight over, the tank was put into efficiency in more or less short time, so that the calculation done by information organs opponents showed deceptive.

Ultimately, the fight in open field between co-penetrating devices,

the need to issue orders on the drum to evolving situations, difficulties of orientation, randomness and imprecision of the information, all contributed to create a completely new type of battle. And also true that previously these features had been expressed, but *Crusader* was going to promote an action of incomparably greater dimensions. No wonder, therefore, if anyone sees Commander took decisions on the basis of an outdated or even incorrect situation and if that hesitated to engage with immediacy to adhere to an aggressive deadline required of a top Command.

For the British side aerial support had been carefully prepared. The group n. 204 had become *Western Desert Air Force* (Air Vice Mar. A. Coningham) with nine fighter squadrons, one of which is a long range; six medium bombers and one tactical reconnaissance. This complex could receive help from group n. 205 and a squadron of bombers of the *Mediterranean Fleet*, as well as the help of one or more transport squadrons. It was, therefore, an entity satisfying, but most measure and importance the relief was undoubtedly the creation of a series of *Air Replacement Pools* (replacement aircraft parks), in charge of receiving the aircraft repair workshops and a number of *squadrons* level than first line. *Air Replacement Pools* were staggered in depth: advanced ones were equipped with two days "replacement", that backlog, just seven days at Natrun⁽⁵⁵⁾. This Organization stemmed from the decision of Mar. Tedder not train more squadrons since the availability of personnel and means not permitted. In essence: relatively few units but well-endowed and always expected to number⁽⁵⁶⁾.

About moving forward of aeronautical equipment based on the progress of the offensive, was planned to use two group commands for use with various functions for performing of rush (while one was operating, the other moved) and the rapid development of landing strips. Of course cooperation was careful argument aerial-land interest, willing to avoid dangerous blunt dissection that occurred in summer. At every command of Corps and Armored Division were formed air support controllers, in order to address quickly the units of the *Western Desert Air Force* on targets from time to time reported during the attack. However, to avoid possible leakage and allow instead massive concentrations of

air force, Coningham was the task of the controllers to the submission of the reports provided by aerial exploration and intervention requests made by ground Commands.

In this context arose suddenly a strange discussion. The New Zealand Government, inspired probably by Freyberg, intended to prevent a recurrence of what had happened in Greece and Crete, and formally asked the assurance that New Zealand troops were adequately supported by aviation. The calculations made in London on reports of forces differed from those estimated in Cairo, so the Sub-Chief of 20 October. Staff of the *Royal Air Force*, he went to Egypt for a joint examination of the air situation. On balance the report was accepted by the British more efficient aircraft including 48 bombers based at Malta⁽⁵⁷⁾ against 385 German-Italian Cyrenaica and probably another 72 in Crete and the Aegean⁽⁵⁸⁾. As a result, Churchill was able to give to the Government of New Zealand requesting insurance.

The action of the *Western Desert Air Force* developed virtually since mid-October with three objectives: to gain air superiority in Cyrenaica, cause losses to maritime and land supplies of the Axis and carry out an exhaustive reconnaissance work. All without discovering too British intentions. The attack on the German-Italian logistics facilities began from the most distant points: the main Italian and Libyan ports and ships on routes to North Africa alleging. By early November, on the Cyrenaica poured maximum stress: ports, logistic centers, workshops, warehouses, airstrips were hunted and bombarded, even if weather conditions do not allow to derive from this commitment the expected results; as well the last week before the day D caused no sensitive damage due to persistent bad weather⁽⁵⁹⁾. As of 17 November, when Tedder reported to the Chief of staff of the *Royal Air Force*: “*The squadrons are at full staff, aircraft and crews, we reserve the right to aircraft, and constitute a reserve ready to take*”⁽⁶⁰⁾, the *Western Desert Air Force* had the following elements:

14 *squadrons* (including a naval) short-range fighter;
 2 *squadrons* of long range fighters;
 8 *squadrons* of medium bombers;
 3 tactical reconnaissance *squadrons*;
 1 *flights* strategic reconnaissance;
 1 topographic reconnaissance *flights*,
 without considering two heavy bombardment *squadrons* stationed in Egypt⁽⁶¹⁾. In all it was about 650 fighters and bombers

(including those based in Egypt), with more than 550 efficient aircraft, where you had to add Malta 74 Aircraft, 66 of which are efficient ⁽⁶²⁾. According to Churchill, the availability was much higher: “*of modern combat equipment 1311 which were under [the Western Desert Air Force], 1072 could be used, in addition to 10 squadrons which operated from Malta*” ⁽⁶³⁾.

Even by conflicting data exists on Italian number of machines available. The situation with regard to the 18 November was as follows ⁽⁶⁴⁾:

Type	Sector East		Sector Central		Sector West		Total	
	organic	efficient	organic	efficient	organic	efficient	organic	efficient
Bombardment	55	41	-	-	8	3	63	44
Dive	5	2	10	2	5	3	20	7
bombing	5	4	-	-	-	-	5	4
Torpedo	11	4	11	8	4	3	26	15
Bomb.	117	81	37	32	105	80	259	193
Strategic	-	-	8	4	8	7	16	11
recon.	21	14	16	8	15	8	52	30
Fighters								
Maritime								
recon.								
Aerial								
observation								
Total	214	146	82	54	145	104	441	304

However a document sent by the 5th Air Fleet to Comando Superiore with respect to November 19, indicates different figures: total 475 existing aircraft, of which 313 efficient (see chart next page) ⁽⁶⁵⁾. Being the Central and West sectors totally committed in convoys escort services, the protection of place of Tripoli and Benghazi and surrounding airports, and maritime reconnaissance, combat equipment usable in the Eastern Cyrenaica were limited to:

Type	Existing	Efficient
Bombers	55	40
Dive bombers	2	2 (?)
Torpedo Bombers	5	4
Fighter	107	75
Total	169	121

Command 5th Air Fleet Official Organization				
Efficient war status of aircraft on the date 19/11/1941				
Unit	Location	Type of Aircraft	Load	Efficient
EAST SECTOR				
8 th Bomber Wing	Martuba	S.79	25	13
13 th Wing [11 th Bomber Group 43 rd Bomber Group	Brace	Br. 20	15	14
	Martuba 2	Br. 20	15	13
239 th Dive Bomber Squadron	Derna	JU 87	2	(*)
279 th Torp. Bomber Squadron	Derna	S.79	5	4
19 th Squadron R.S.T	Derna	S.79	11	4
20 th Fighter Group	Martuba	G. 50	36	27
155 th Fighter Group				
351 st and 378 th Fighter Squadrons	Ain Gazala	G.50	24	20
153 rd Fighter Group	Derna	Mc. 200	36	19
376 th Fighter Squadron	Bir Hakeim	CR. 42	11	9
67 th Gr. [129 th . Observation Squadron 32 nd Observation Squadron1	Ain Gazala	Ro.37b	9	3
	Bir Hakeim	Ro.37b	6	5
CENTRAL SECTOR				
244 th Bomber Squadron	Benghazi	S.81	4	2
209 th Dive Bomber Squadron.	Benghazi	Ju.87	5	1
174 th Squadron R.S.T	Berka	S.79	8	6
160 th Fighter Squadron	Benghazi	Cr.42	43	38
360 th Fighter Squadron	Benghazi	G.50	11	6
Of the 155 th Group				
2 nd Group APC	Berka	Ghibli	4	3
15 th Gr. 32 nd Observation Squadron S	Agedabia	Ca.311	8	4
125 th Observation Squadron				
196 th Marine Recon Squadron	Benghazi	Cz.501	8	4
Nuclei 145 th Fighter Gr.	Benghazi	S.81-82	9	(*)
Sec. 614 th Squadron Socc.	Benghazi	Cz.506	1	1
WEST SECTOR				
98 th Bomber Group	C. Benito	Br.20	8	3
236 th . Dive Bomber Squadron	C. Benito	JU 87	5	3
175 th .R.S.T. Squadron	C. Benito	S.79	4	3
3 rd Fighter Group	Sorman	CR.42	43	36
Sec. 3 rd Fighter GR.	Misurata	CR.42	6	3
12 th Fighter Group	C. Benito	G.50	32	16
69 th Observation Group	Zuara	Ca. 311	14	14
1 st Group APC	Mellaha	Ghibli	17	9
103 rd Intercept S. Avio Sah.	Misurata	S.81	6	5
Avia Squadron Sahara	Hon	Ghibli	11	9
145 th Marine Recon Squadron	Pisida	Cz.501	5	2
145 th Transport Group	C. Benito	S.74-S.75		
		S.81-S.82	15	3
614 th Rescue Squadron	Karamanli	Cz. 506	6	3
(*) The number of efficient aircraft is not in the original				

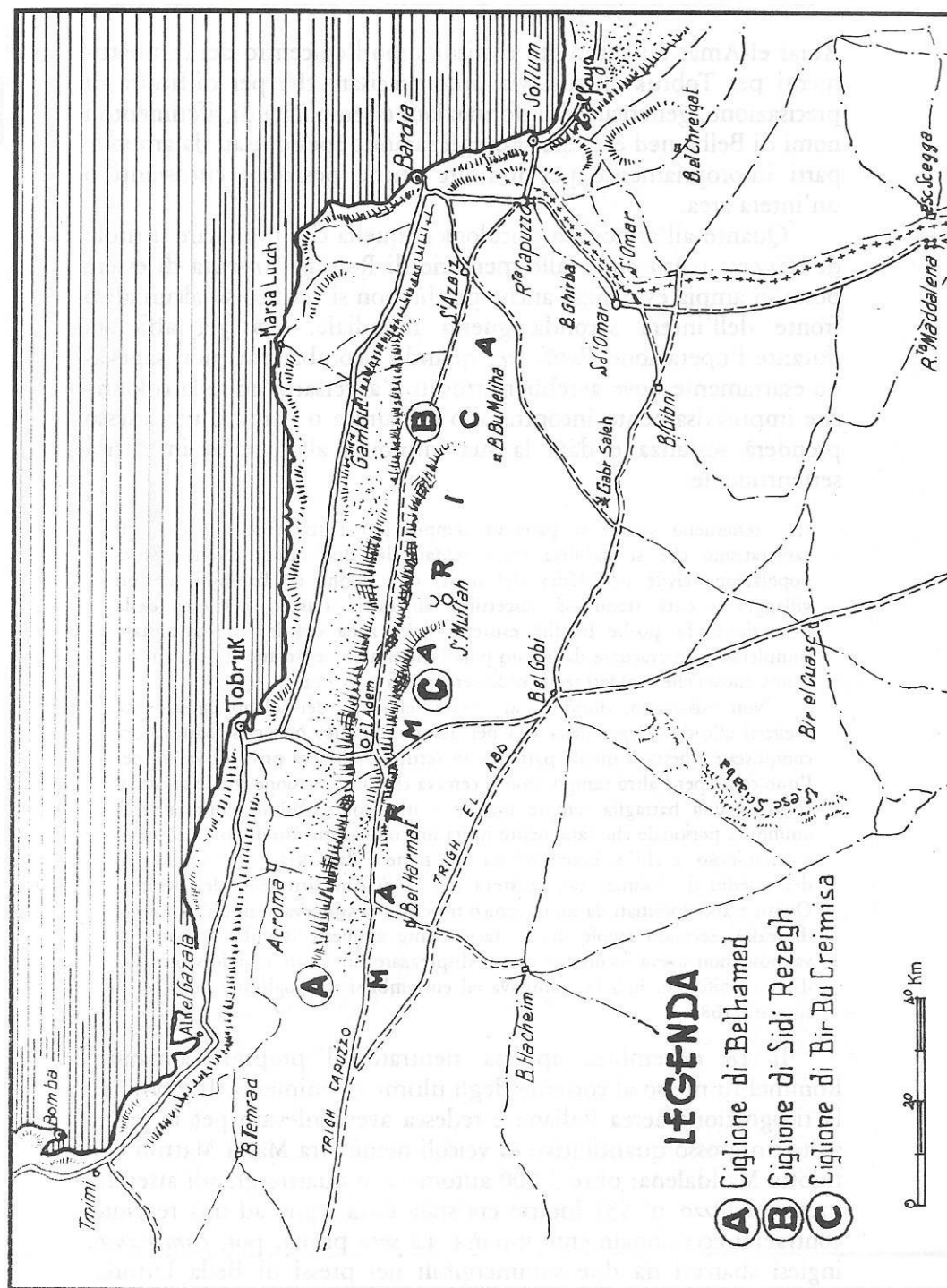
The actual texture of *Fliegerführer* forces there are uncertainties. According to the Adm. Weichold they included 3 bomber groups, 1 fighter (reinforced), 1 Squadron of fighter-bombers, strategic reconnaissance squadron 1 and 1 tactical reconnaissance for a total of 177 aircraft, which whom half efficient ⁽⁶⁶⁾. Churchill pointed out altogether 190 aircraft, of which 120 online ⁽⁶⁷⁾.

To complete the landscape on the eve of operation *Crusader* should be mention the natural and psychological environments. The battlefield was the Marmarica, i.e. from Cyrenaica to the east northeast of el-Mechili (sketch No. 42). It has a flat, hard surface and discovery, passable without difficulty by means of suitable tyres, except during heavy rains. The terrain is marked by Rocky filleting with Equatorial trend navigable by vehicles only in certain points. These ridges, whose northern slopes generally assumes the appearance of a real slope, wind astride to Trigh Capuzzo. To the North, one of them runs parallel to the track from meridian about Acroma until Bardia, passing South from Gambut. It dims between ed-Duda and Belhamed, efficacy, therefore was tapped for the passage of the Axis Road. We will nominate it as ridge of Belhamed. The second, South of Trigh Capuzzo, part from the height of ed-Duda and continues East with el-Amar Abiar-Sidi Rezegh marabuto-hill. 175-Bir Sciafsciuf up at Bir el-Cleta. It was known as Sidi Rezegh ridge. The third, also in the South, follows the Trigh the track by about ten kilometers to the West of el-Adem until hill 176 (East of Bir Bu Creimisa) and beyond. It was called Bir Bu Creimisa Ridge or "third cliff". Given this situation, the trend of the three blocks in parallel argument and the spaces interposed determined positions on which we concentrate the fight Southeast of Tobruk. Among ed-Duda and Belhamed, as has been said, passed the axis road; between the ridge of Belhamed and Sidi Rezegh the Trigh Capuzzo, ran controlled respectively by the Bir Sciuret positions and hill 175, particularly by the latter; East of the edge of Bir Bu Creimisa, then, was a flat rectangle of about fifteen kilometers long by 5 wide. The entrances were Got en-Nbeidat to the East and the threshold of Abiar el-Amar in the West. In the middle was prepared the landing field of Sidi Rezegh. The three blocks, the threshold of

THE FIELD OF BATTLE

IL CAMPO DI BATTAGLIA

Schizzo n. 42



Abiar el-Amar and the airport will be the epicenter of fighting for Tobruk. However, it is useful to point out that for clarification, comprehension difficulties of information and ease of reference the names of Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed are often used by both sides to indicate also inappropriately surrounding positions or an entire area.

As for the psychological atmosphere, one that could give the title of "*war without hate*" Rommel's memories, deserves to be placed in wide evidence, also because it occurred on any other front the entire second world war. Had already surfaced during operation *Battleaxe*, when the fighters did not know exactly where they found the opponent or if the column suddenly met was a friend or enemy, but now will give substance and its mark to the war in North Africa:

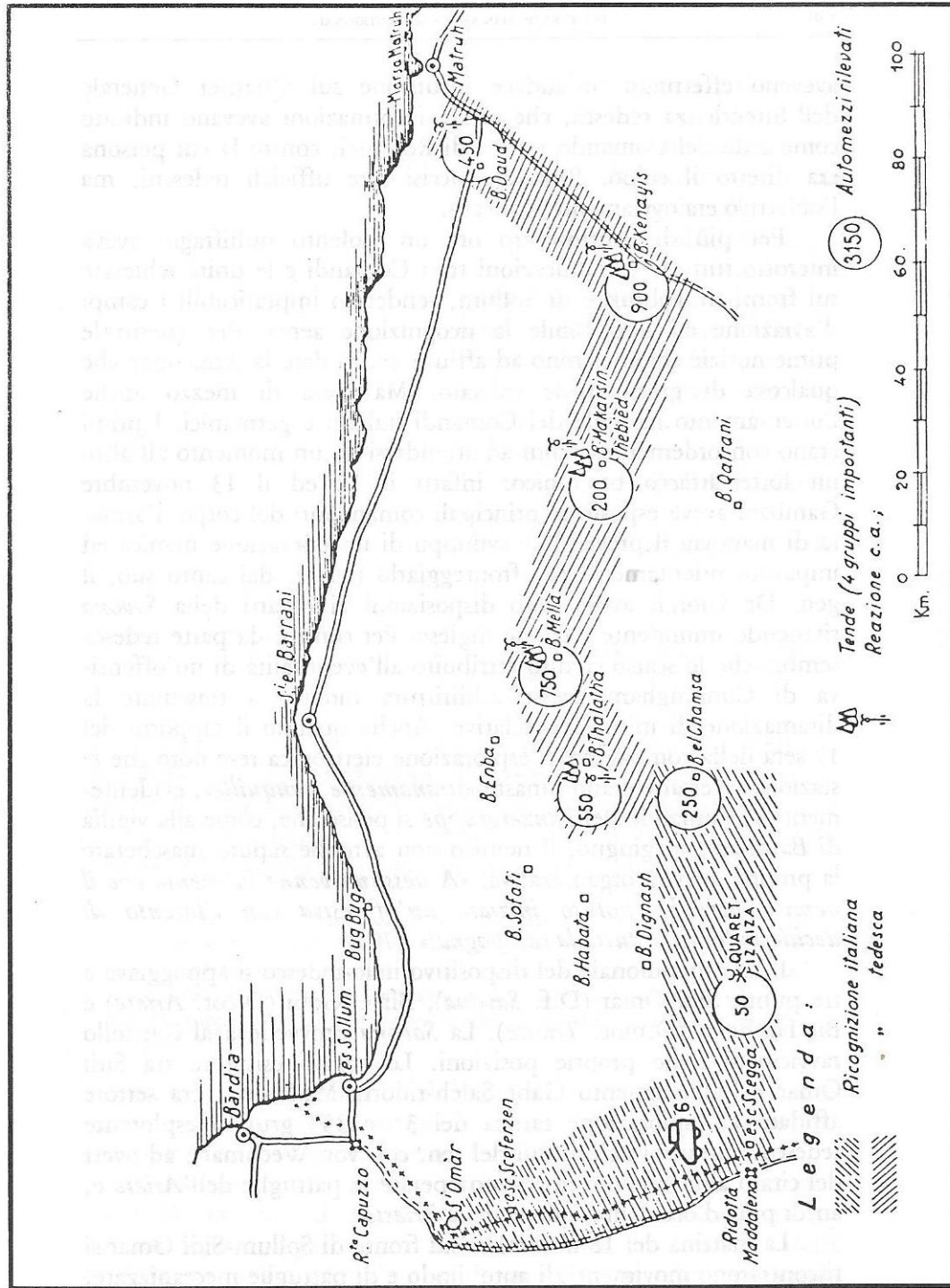
“A strange phenomenon is increasingly clearly showed: the sense of camaraderie which is established between soldiers of the two fields. There was no civilian population in North Africa, no women, no children's village or peaceful cities likely to be swept up in the chaos of destruction. The few existing locations in the area of the front were completely evacuated from their Arab populations and were destroyed even before the German soldiers had arrived in Africa.

There was, therefore, on this earth that soldiers also subject to harsh laws of desert life. In addition, there was beating to win this or that part of a territory that was worthless for one as for the other side, is not seeking a decision with the weapons during a battle always mobile and mutable. So the feeling of personal animosity that inevitably inspires a infantry combat, bitter and bloody, and that manifested itself on the one hand and on the other in some moments of the siege of Tobruk, did not exist in free desert combat. These were dominated by a mutual respect and were held in an atmosphere of fairness, according to moral rules accepted in both tacit loaves. The valiant had no reason to despise a valiant wearing a different uniform. He admired and both proud of the same successes”.⁽⁶⁸⁾.

On 18 November, just returned to his command, Rommel was informed of the latest happenings. On the 15th, the Italian and German aerial reconnaissance had detected for the first time a big quantity of enemy vehicles between Marsa Matruh and fort Maddalena: over 3,000 vehicles and four large tents.(sketch No. 43). In addition had been made to sign an exceptionally intense anti-aircraft reaction. The night before, then, British Commandos landed by two submarines near Beda Littoria,

RICOGNIZIONE AEREA ITALO-TEDESCA DEL 15 NOVEMBRE

Schizzo n. 43



they had carried out a daring RAID on the Quancier Generale of German Quartermaster wrong information had indicated as the tactical headquarters of the Command of Rommel, against whose person was shot. Two German officers were killed, but the goal was obviously missed.

For more than twenty-four hours a violent thunderstorm had discontinued all communication between the commands and units deployed on the fronts of Tobruk and Sollum, making impracticable the airfields and impossible to aerial reconnaissance. For this the first information started to flow without giving the feeling that something big was started. But there was also the medium mental orientation of German and Italian Commands. The first were unanimously inclined to expect at any moment a strong British attack; in fact, the 12 and 13 November Gambarà had exposed the main commanders of the Corps of Maneuver the predictable development of an enemy and operation laid down guidelines for tackling it ⁽⁶⁹⁾ and, on the other hand, Gen. De Giorgis had given the provisions of *Savona* British action was imminent. On the other hand, from the German side it seems that the lack of credit given to Cunningham's offensive had even led to the branch of protective measures. Even when the report of the 17th evening exploration electronics company reported that opposing stations remained "*strangely quiet*", apparently under the command of composition and terminology it was thought that, as on the eve of *Battleaxe*, in June, the enemy would not have been able to disguise its organizational activity. "*It occurred to anyone that the enemy could begin an offensive with the aim of deciding the outcome of the entire campaign!*" ⁽⁷⁰⁾.

The southern side of the Italian-German line is supported at three points: Sidi Omar (*Savona* Inf. Div.), Bir el Gobi (*Ariete* Arm. Div.) and Bir Hakeim (*Trieste* Mot. Div.). The *Savona* provided close control of their positions. The space between Sidi Omar and alignment Gabr Saleh-fort Maddalena was entrusted to the exploration tactic of the German 3rd and 33rd Recon Group (both under the command of Lieut. Col. von Wechmar); West of that alignment had to operate patrols of *Ariete* and, even more to the West, those of *Trieste*.

On the morning of 18 November on the Sollum -Sidi Omar armored car movements are found and mechanized patrols, kept at a distance by artillery shots, but South of the Trigh el Abd-

where a few days acted enemy motorized elements, that when meeting with German and Italian patrols usually fell back after a short skirmish-only on late began to filter out news that gave the sensation of something very different from a simple «episode». In the afternoon, at 17:30, Lt. Col. von Wechmar communicated to the command of the *Afrikakorps* which shortly before noon the 33rd Recon Group had had a fight with enemy units carrying out a “*reconnaissance in force*”⁽⁷¹⁾, and to the 3rd Recon Group on the 17th had been attacked “*by two hundred armored vehicles*”, between Gabr Saleh and Bir Gibni⁽⁷²⁾. No matter how well Crüwell intended to take precautions, Rommel, who in the meantime had returned to investigate the attack on Tobruk-he was bent on launching an attack the 23rd - was not absolutely this warning, indeed warned bluntly *Afrikakorps* Commander. “*We must not miss the mastery of nerves!*”

That evening the situation of *Panzergruppe Africa* said:

- “1. the situation of the enemy: unchanged.
2. Opposite of Sollum: the enemy has pushed forward a reconnaissance in force towards the 21st Armored Division.
3. Opposite of Tobruk:... “⁽⁷³⁾.

Instead for the Italian Comando Superiore news were more than enough to confirm the occurrence than feared. Although the 22:00 the *Panzergruppe's* command repeated that there was cause for concern, at midnight sent to Comando Supremo Gambara a dispatch of another tenor:

“Front Sollum: eight hours this morning. enemy vehicles spotted South of Sidi Omar et foot units intent strengthen the soil. Afternoon artillery *Savona* having fired thousands of rounds against armored vehicles and armored concentrations. Radio interception [posts] broadcast by unencrypted enemy suggest imminent enemy attack from the South, Sidi Omar towards Bir el Gobi.”⁽⁷⁴⁾.

and telephoned the Army Corps of Maneuver to inform *Ariete* and *Trieste* divisions of the upcoming offensive (scheduled for the 20th) from the South-East and direct them to react on the flanks of the enemy.

During the night came other news. At 20:00 a patrol of the I/26th infantry, the garrison of Sidi Omar, had captured a British soldier belonging to the 18th of campaign artillery 4th Indian Division. Was the driver of a jeep stuck a couple of hours before from a piece from 37/45 at the stronghold of Sidi

SITUATION OF THE ITALIAN FORCE AT THE DATE OF 15 NOVEMBER

Forces	Men	Armament			Artillery		
		SMG & Mg	mortar	l.f.m	A/T	A/A	Field
R. Army							
Tripolitania	41,058 (1)	3,512 (2)	194 (3)	59	55	116 (4)	349
Cirenaica	102,459 (5)	5,265 (6)	663 (7)	70	1,036	458 (8)	717
Sahara	3,940 (9)	246 (10)	12 (11)	--	24	28 (12)	19
Total	147,457 (13)	9,023 (14)	869 (15)	129	1,115	602 (16)	1,085
R. Navy	4,095 (17)	184 (18)				86 (19)	67
R. Air Force	14,399 (20)					58 (21)	
Grand Total	165,951 (22)	9,105 (23)	869	129	1,115	746 (24)	1,152

(1) 1,698 Officers, 2,812 NCO's, 26,510 national, 15,053 Libyans.

(2) 1,338 submachine guns and 2,174 machine guns.

(3) 182 mortars from 45 and 12 from 81.

(4) 35 of 20 and 81 pieces of other type.

(5) 5,039 Officers, 7,117 NCO's, 88,117 national, 2,186 Libyans.

(6) 2,327 submachine guns and 2,938 machine guns.

(7) 478 mortars from 45 and 185 from 81.

(8) 355 gunner from 20 and 103 other pieces.

(9) 130 officers, 198 NCO's, 783 national, 2,829 Libyans.

(10) 64 submachine guns and 182 machine guns.

(11) by 45 mm.

(12) by 20 mm.

(13) 6,867 official, 10,127 NCO's, 115,410 national, 10,038 Libyans.

(14) 3,729 submachine guns and 5,294 machine guns.

(15) 672 mortars from 45 and 197 from 81.

(16) 418 by gunner 20 and 184 pieces of other type.

(17) 182 officers, 488 NCO's, 3,425 sailors.

(18) 15 submachine guns and 169 machine guns.

(19) 21 by gunner 20 and 65 other pieces.

(20) 906 officers, 1,138 NCO's, 11,462 national, 893 Libyan.

(21) all from 20 mm gunner

(22) 7,955 official, 11,753 NCO's, 130,307 national, 16,023 Libyans.

(23) 3,744 submachine guns and 5,463 machine guns.

(24) 497 gunner from 20 and 249 other pieces.

SITUATION OF THE ITALIAN FORCE AT THE DATE OF 15 NOVEMBER

Force	Armored Forces			Vehicles				Total
	Tank L	tank M	Armored Cars	Desiel effic.	ineff.	gasoline effic.	ineff	
R. Army								
Tripolitania	--	2	2	742	673	303	740	2.458
Cirenaica	187	154	23	3.478	1.830	2.988	1.506	9.802
Sahara				64	53	83	57	257
Total	187	156	25	4.284	2.556	3.374	2.303	12.517
R. Navy				61	13	64	11	149
R. Air Force				516	354	515	155	1.540
Grand Total	187	156	25	4.861	2.923	3.953	2.469	14.206

Omar again ⁽⁷⁵⁾. Subjected to interrogation by the Commander of the I/26th, Maj. Raffaele Caccavale, military, regimental, qualified as Messenger had said that two armored divisions (the 2nd and 7th) had already spread to the West and North-West of Sidi Omar; the 4th Indian Division faced Sidi Omar positions at Halfaya and beyond; the 4th South African Division was located at Sidi Barrani and another South African was more backward, moving westward. He also stated that the British would attack "*in the next few days*" with three columns. The prisoner also was holding a package that easily was obtained the entire personnel of 4th Indian Division, with the conventional names of each unit ⁽⁷⁶⁾. Obviously the information were not one hundred percent effective, however they were beginning to see the outlines of the British initiative: two armored divisions, a direct to Gabr Saleh, the other further West, processing to el Cuasc and Bir el Gobi ⁽⁷⁷⁾; the 4th Indian across from the *Savona*; two South African divisions in the coastal sector to Sollum -Halfaya. Rommel remained incredulous and retained the belief even when Crüwell went to Gambut, the 19th at noon. Since the dawn of the day before the 7th Armored Division, preceded by a screen of armored cars, had penetrated Marmarica passing the border at fort Maddalena. "*Our offensive.-reported Auchinleck-surprised the enemy. In fact I n "wanted that at least for a day, if not for two, it thinks that we were conducting a reconnaissance in force."* He saw right, at least for the Germans.

About the date of the start of operation *Crusader*, appears necessary an explicit nod to the voice of "*treason*", which had to circulate since 1941 with allusion to the uncanny timeliness British intervention against our naval fleet and against axis convoys towards Libya and, after the war, with specific reference to the attack on Tobruk suspended due to unexpected-in a manner of speaking-Cunningham's offensive. On the first point there is no need to return: it is said: that only in 1974 was authorized by the British *Ultra's* revelation, the deciphering machine which allowed reading messages encrypted with the quintessential German *Enigma*. Therefore, as regards the Mediterranean theatre operations, top secret communications sent by Supermarina Superaereo and representatives and the main German Commands in Italy and encrypted with the Enigma for later transmission to the unit of the X *Fliegerkorps* and

then the 2nd Luftflotte, were intercepted and decrypted without difficulty by the opponent. Rommel also, of course, employed *Enigma* for their dispatches to Rome and Berlin and this explains many things. But in the specific case of *Crusader* looks like a photograph of a sketch of Rommel's hand about the conquest of Tobruk is finished on the table of Auchinleck ⁽⁷⁸⁾. After the conflict the Mar. Kesselring had this to say: "*I've never heard any, nor by Rommel nor by his staff, passing the enemy of his plan of attack on Tobruk in 1941*" ⁽⁷⁹⁾ and then Lt. Col. Westphal, *Panzergruppe* operations Bureau Chief's, ignored the thing: "*I am not aware that Rommel operations plan, prepared for the attack on Tobruk, fell into the hands of the English General Auchinleck*". Instead Bayerlein, then Chief of staff of the *Deutsches Afrikakorps*, stated: "*I know, during the course of the offensive, that the attack on Rommel (...) was passed to the British. This was validated by statements of certain English prisoners. Could not be determined who was the traitor (...). However I can exclude that Italians may have had hand in treason in case of Tobruk, as in other similar cases could prove their loyalty to the cause*" ⁽⁸⁰⁾. The most interested, Auchinleck, thus officially expressed:

"Before launching the offensive know that were going to begin preparations for an attack on Tobruk, but didn't know the date of the planned attack. I thought, however, seriously to postpone my offensive until Rommel had not committed to Tobruk, with the idea to capture the enemy while he was on the wrong side and face in adverse conditions. However, the urgent need to start the offensive as soon as possible and the possibility that Rommel was not able to launch his action before many weeks made me abandon the idea, albeit with some reluctance. We know now there is no doubt that Rommel planned to attack Tobruk from the East on 23 November and had all his plans for this venture." ⁽⁸¹⁾.

Obviously, you are not able to comment, except one: that a manuscript of Rommel could not possibly be photographed or lost that in the same place that was strictly guarded, i.e. at the command of composition and terminology. We can make assumptions, because it ignores when the command in Chief of the Middle East would come into possession of the sketch. The fact is that, although preferable to seize Rommel already engaged with his 15th *Panzerdivision* against the stronghold, this combination was not indispensable. *Crusader* was designed

as an action of force, to launch as soon as possible, regardless of the intentions of Rommel. And how much determination there was about it emerges from the originally shipped from Churchill to Auchinleck on the night of 15 November:

“For the first time the troops of Great Britain and the Empire are engaged with all the strength of the available resources in an attack against the Germans. The battle will change the course of the war. Considered, in bringing this tough blow to the enemy, who fight for the final victory, for home and for freedom. Desert army will write a new page of history that is equal to the reputation of Blenheim and Waterloo. The eyes of all the Nations have turned to you. All our hearts beat with your. God be with the most right”.

Auchinleck, however, believed that "*the quality and quantity of troops and equipment were just adequate to give a reasonable chance of success*"⁽⁸²⁾. But it was modest.

3. THE BRITISH ADVANCE ON BIR EL GOBI AND GABR SALEH (18-19 NOVEMBER).

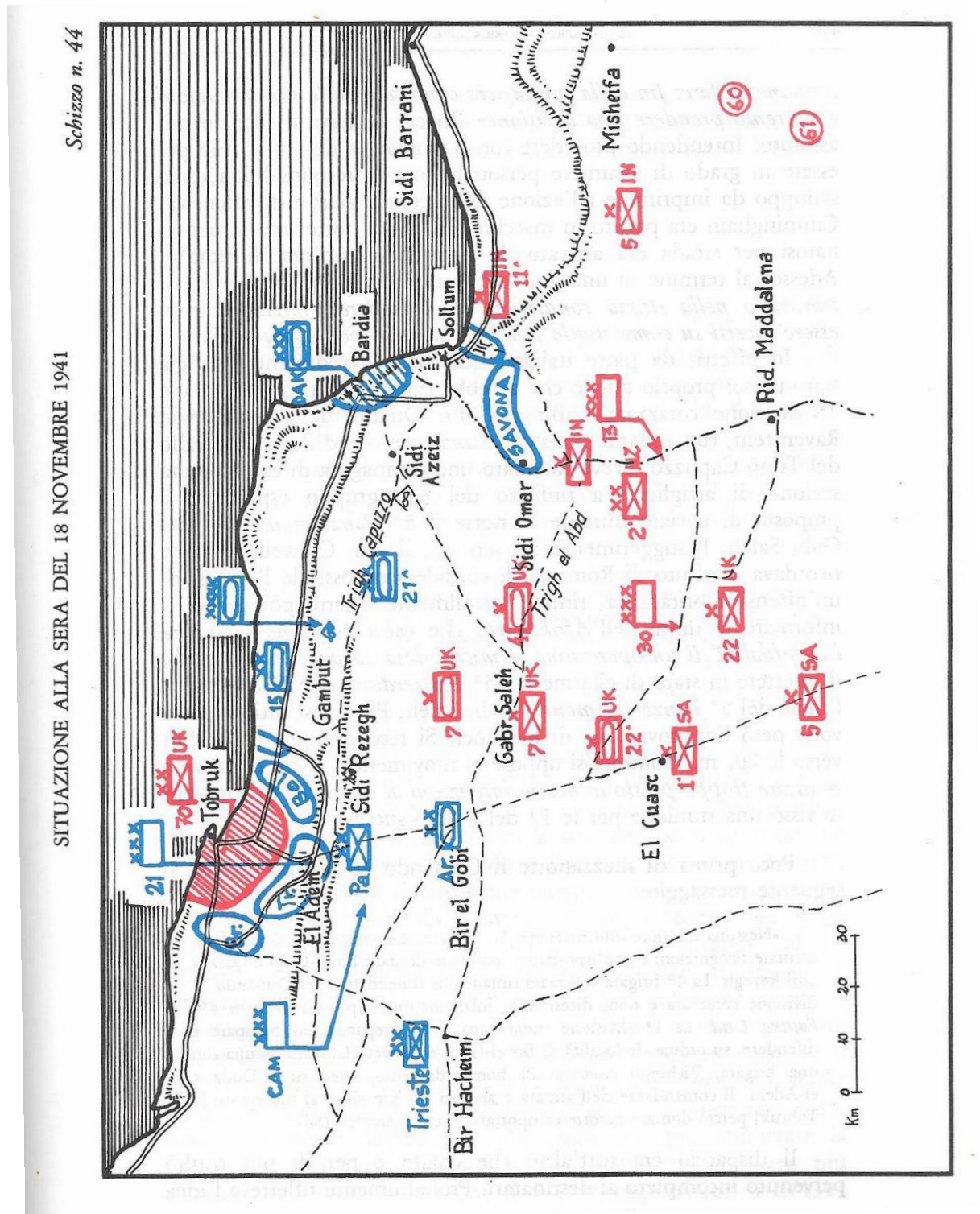
At 06:00 of 18 November 30th Corp began to cross the border wire. Three armored regiments preceded the 7th Armored Division: the 1st *King's Dragoon Guards* on the right, as the vanguard of the 4th Armored Brigade; the 4th South African at the Centre, just north of fort Maddalena; the 11th Hussars with a support group column to the left, in front of the 22nd Armored Brigade. Across the border, at a distance of between 20 and 30 kilometers, were prepared three fuel depots. Refilling, the armored car regiments buckled to the Northwest, opening out on a front of about 60 km, and headed towards Bir Gibni respectively, Gabr Saleh and Bir el Gobi⁽⁸³⁾ to "*look for the bulk of the enemy and locate their flanks*"⁽⁸⁴⁾. The march, protected by a large umbrella fighter aircraft proceeded undisturbed until 10:15 then stopped: the 4th South African escorted a column of some one fifty enemy vehicles moving on Trigh el Abd, wanted to wait for reinforcements; the 1st *King's Dragoon Guards* was to clash with four armored cars and shooting six German tanks and 11th Hussars ran into a brief fight with, some German armored cars and, much later, with two tank platoons of *Ariete*, eight kilometers south-east of Bir el Gobi.

The screen stop searching ended around 12:30, when a squadron of the 2nd *Royal Tanks* of the 7th Armored Brigade passed in front of the South Africans, focusing on Gabr Saleh. The advance resumed after an hour and the 4th South African said that the opponent was beginning to withdraw northwards. At dusk, the day's objectives could be achieved: the 4th Armored Brigade, rejected the German 3rd reconnaissance group, stood to the North of Bir Gibni; the 7th Armoured Brigade staying a few kilometers northwest of Gabr Saleh. The 22nd Armored Brigade was next to el Cuasc-Bir el Gobi. To the left of the 7th Armored Division and moving the rearmost 1st South African Division. It had passed the border some 50 kilometers south of fort Maddalena. In the evening, at the end of a wide semicircle, his defense is settled to brigades for Bir el-Gobi: the 1st in the area of el-Cuasc and 5th in Eluet el-Hamra (thirty miles further South), to flank protection left of the Corps. On the front of Sollum -Sidi Omar the 13th Corps was modeled on the German-Italian defenses. The 11th Indian Brigade on the coast; the 7th Indian Brigade at Bir Sheferzen, with the *Central India Horse* before the positions of the *Savona*, from Sidi al edge of Omar Halfaya. the 5th Indian Brigade at the rear, in the area of Bir Bir Habata at Sofafi to provide a secure foothold in the case of unfavorable development of the operation; the New Zealand Division southwest of Gasr el-Abd, horse of Sidi Omar-fort Maddalena (sketch No. 44).

At 18:20 Gen. Gott gave the 7th Armored Division orders for the next day: the three armored regiments, but they passed under the direct control of the brigades, had to be pushed north to find the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* and West towards the *Ariete*, which was known in the area. In this way the first was entrusted to 4th and 7th Armored Brigade, the 2nd to 22nd Armored Brigade and 7th Support group. The most obvious consequence of such measures was the subdivision of large unit into two blocks directed at divergent targets.

So good, however, for the 8th Army, one might say. But everything was going "too well". We know that Cunningham himself waited the first British move to provoked a speedy German reply, enough to provide light for the second move. "*The march forward unfortunately will not pass unnoticed to the enemy*," he said the meeting of commanders held on 29 October-*from its going to understand reactions so that we reject*

The situation in the evening of 18 November,



proposes to do. Since the first evening we shall know his intentions and we can take a decision. " Instead the most absolute silence reigned. Intending to proceed with 30 Corps command to be able to personally take responsibility for development by providing for the action of the second day of the offensive, Cunningham had left in the car in the middle of the night, but bogged down on the street had arrived by Norrie an hour late. Now, at the end of a quiet day, British leaders *"were in the strange position of own initiative and be unsure on how to use it because the enemy does not acted"* ⁽⁸⁵⁾.

In fact, from Italian side some measure was already taken: just what would have caused the first setback to the 7th Armored Division at Bir el Gobi. As for the Germans, von Ravenstein, Commander of the 21st *Panzerdivision* deployed astride the Trigh Capuzzo, had sent a company of tanks and a section of artillery reinforcement of 33rd Recon Group and proposed start at night the 5th *PanzerRegiment* to Gabr Saleh. The suggestion was sensible. Gen. Crüwell, who well remembered the rejection of Rommel to consider the hypothesis of an British offensive, was initially unsure then decided to inform the information unit that *"we cannot rule out the possibility of an enemy operation intended to travel from the South"*, to put in condition of alarm the 15th *Panzerdivision* and allow sending of the 5th *PanzerRegiment* to Gabr Saleh. For the latter step would be the adoption of. Rommel. He went to Gambut at 20:00, but Rommel opposed the movement: *"we must not show too soon our intentions to the enemy."* In compensation stared at a meeting for the next day at 12:00.

Just before midnight 30th Corp sent out the following message:

"No further information, the 7th Armored Division may [?], after careful reconnaissance and predispositions, occupy tomorrow Bir el Gobi and Sidi Rezegh Qasaba, remains the 4th Armored Brigade under Command of 7th Armored Division and no, means no initially ... more to the West of 450 *Easting Grid*, The 1st South African Division must prepare to occupy and defend, on order, the towns of Bir el Gobi and Gueret Hamza, each with a brigade, much in demand aerial bombing co-operation on el Duda and el-Adem, The Commander of the army is eager to give help as soon as possible [to Tobruk] therefore must act vigorously tomorrow. ⁽⁸⁶⁾,

The dispatch was anything but clear and proved incomplete receipt to recipients. Probably reflected the idea

originally by Norrie, who so certainly wanted to "force" the situation. However led to believe that Cunningham had been persuaded to drop the initial plan and instead decided to focus on Tobruk.

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In the first hours of the 19th, therefore, Gott ordered the 22nd Armored Brigade to proceed on Bir el Gobi, the 7th on Sidi Rezegh, betting on the support of keep fit to act with one or the other, depending on the circumstances, and the 4th Armored Brigade to remain on the positions reached in order to give security to the Divisional right flank and to the left of 13th Corps (sketch No. 45). In turn, around 08:00, on Gen. Brink, Commander of the 1st South African Division, turned his Brigadiers in these terms:

"Things today can evolve rapidly. Please be ready to follow the development of the situation. I await orders at any moment to take Bir el Gobi and Gueret Hamza, each with a brigade. On that evidence, the 1st Infantry Brigade will el-Gobi and the 5th Gueret Hamza. The 7th Armored Division move against Bir-el Gobi today, not just completed reconnaissance and predispositions".⁽⁸⁷⁾.

At Bir el Gobi-the *Ariete* was adjusting its front line to the news. Would have to build a defensive line with a semicircle of strongpoints manned by reinforced battalions were targets for about ten kilometers south of the tracks. Reconnaissance had been made and works in progress (despite the recent massive rains) while remaining in the Division still ongoing dislocation, straddling the Trigh el Abd. News to come during the afternoon of the 18th led Gen. Balotta to defer to implementation of new deployment and to look for a better solution, hastily more collection. Following the orders of Gambara, with Gen. Mannerini-which in practice served as Deputy Commander of the Corps of maneuver-at 07:30 showed up in command of the *Ariete*. It was the local situation and illustrated the defensive structure studied; After a brief discussion, Mannerini ended up approving the decision to restrict Balotta to make more compact deployment. So the V/8th bersaglieri with II/132nd

artillery remained where it was, on the trail to el-Cuasc; the III/8th bersaglieri with a group of 75/27 of the 3rd Quick was assigned to the East of Trivium, as the left flank; the XII/8^o bersaglieri with artillery I/132nd to the West, as the right flank. Just north of the triple crossroads were deployed the group from 105/28 of the 24th and the Corps grouping seven pieces of 102 of the Milmart. Even further north, meeting, the 132nd Tank Regiment.

The 22nd Armored Brigade had just put in motion when it was reached by Gott, who solicited the Gen. Scott-Cockburn to definitely attack Bir el Gobi-hunting the *Ariete*. Later, Norrie excluded categorically to be met in a timely manner about the measure: "*for sure-he wrote-I was never asked if the 22nd Armored Brigade could attack frontally Bir el Gobi, or I would have passé, because now the radio silence was broken 30 Corps Command had to be made aware, in broad terms, current events (...)*"⁽⁸⁸⁾. The responsibility for the order, which committed a third of the British armored forces would fall then on Gott. Maybe he thought dangerous to get involved in a large scale battle at Sidi Rezegh without having first deleted or removed the danger constituted by the presence of the *Ariete* at Bir el Gobi. Maybe it was possible to remove from the scene the Italian Division without large expenditure. However, this decision will dearly cost Scott-Cockburn and, worse, the entire 7th Armored Division.

To about 11:00 the 22nd Armored Brigade, advancing behind the screen of the 11th Hussars, stumbles on the first hurdle: an M 13 tank company with a section of 75/27 pushed to Bir el-Dleua, a few miles South-East of Bir el Gobi. The fight was short and the Italian units stationed themselves at the triple crossroads. Shortly after the Brigade came before the three cornerstones of the *Ariete*, already in a State of alarm⁽⁸⁹⁾. Gen. Scott-Cockburn-which probably thought not to be facing a organized defense, even if very calmly-lined up eight pieces by 25 pounds and, while being a preparing the shot, ordered the attack. The 2nd *Gloucestershire Hussards* right and 4th County of London Yeomanry (C.L.Y.) left is launched forward. The one was directed against the positions of the V/8th bersaglieri, the other against the XII/8th bersaglieri. The V battalion was the best placed: for several days was in place, so placement and gun emplacements were well-constructed and forgotten. The XII Battalion had not yet had the

time to silt up and the third was even disembarking the last units by trucks. The advance, almost in line, the three regiments of *Crusader* opposed the reaction of all cannons of the *Ariete*. The 47/32 and 75/27 began to shoot at point-blank range against the British tanks rising suddenly from the yellowish scud of dust and sand. If the attack seemed to the men of the Rifle Brigade, still waiting, "*about as similar to a cavalry charge made with the vista during this war*"⁽⁹⁰⁾, the frontal crash was so brutal that two regiments of Yeomanry had to enlarge the maneuver to act from the Northwest and northeast sides of the defense. The XII bersaglieri battalion managed to repel the 4th C.L.Y., but the III, after a fierce struggle, found itself in a dreadful position: it had against most of the 22nd Armored Brigade and had not been able to cling to the ground. Gaps were created, the wrapping to the left by 3rd C.L.Y. materialized, the command of the 8th bersaglieri-remained isolated-managed with difficulty to navigate the XII battalion sector. In essence, toward 15:00 Scott-Cockburn had reasonable hopes of success, when suddenly the *Ariete* launched a counter-attack. About two miles north of Bir el Gobi appeared hundred of the 132nd Tank's tanks. Approached, then for a moment arrested. Then, while the seven mobile coastal pieces of 102 opened fire to direct pointing launching the mighty grenades-lead, the distances were tightened and the duel between the armor began. First engaged the 7th (stayed with one company) and the 8th battalion against the 3rd C.L.Y. and 2nd Hussars, then after an hour's indecisive fighting, the XI tank battalion was launched on the side and on the rear of the enemy, which is thrown into disorder. The top speed of the *Crusader* was the 22nd Armored Brigade to fall back in disarray, though. *Ariete* –who had 12 officers and 193 ranks between killed, injured and missing-reported loss of 49 tanks (55 according to the English), 4 guns of 75 and 8 of 47/32. The 22nd Brigade indicated 82 tanks destroyed or damaged (57 according to Italian sources), but it is possible that the figure has been increased to reinforce the urgent need of reinforcements, in fact, in the judgment of Norrie, who not long after he had occasion to visit the combat zone, the field would remain less than twenty *Crusader*.

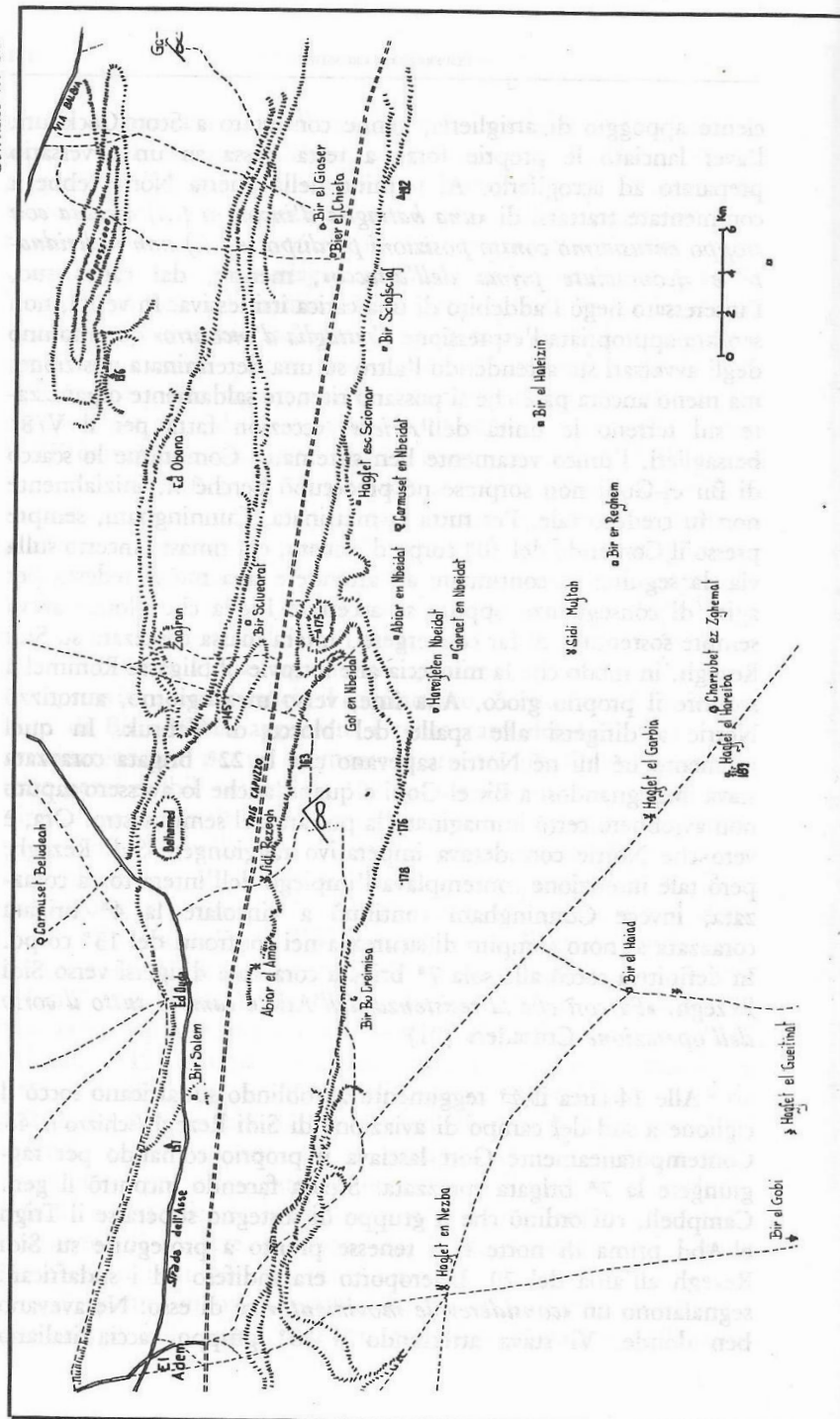
By the British critics the objective was to the rear. Regardless of the lack of training and insufficient Brigade

artillery support, was challenged to Scott-Cockburn having launched his forces head down on an opponent prepared to welcome him. At the end of World War II Norrie had a 'comment' to be a "*battle of encounter (...) implemented with too much enthusiasm against prepared positions (...) is not identified and recognized before the attack,*" while, on the other hand, the concerned denied the debit of a unthinking charge. In truth, it does not seem appropriate for the word "meeting" battle when one of the opponents is waiting on a particular location, but fewer still believe that you can believe firmly organized on the ground units of the *Ariete*, except for the V/8th bersaglieri, the only really well placed. However the check of Bir el Gobi does not surprise it worried because ... initially was believed. Throughout the morning, Cunningham, always at the 30th Corps had remained uncertain on the way forward: If you continue to wait for a German move to act accordingly, or whether to accept the idea that Norrie had always supported, to converge the whole mass armor on Sidi Rezegh, so that the threat to the rear forcing Rommel to discover your game. Eventually, around noon, authorized Norrie to head behind the block of Tobruk. At that time neither he nor Norrie knew that the 22nd Armoured Brigade was pledging to Bir el Gobi-and even if they knew they wouldn't certain imagined the scope of the semi disaster. Now, it is true that Norrie reached Sidi Rezegh were imperative, though that intention contemplated the use of armored force; instead Cunningham continued to constrain the 4th Armored Brigade to known security task against the 13th Corps. Ultimately, it fell to only the 7th Armored Brigade at Sidi Rezegh heading. "*Thus the strength of the Ariete change throughout the course of the operation Crusader*"⁽⁹¹⁾.

At 14:00 about 4th South African armored car Regiment touched the Ridge South of the airfield of Sidi Rezegh (sketch # 46) simultaneously Gott left his command to join the 7th Armored Brigade. Along the way he met Gen. Campbell, which ordered that the support group would exceed Trigh el Abd before night and kept ready to continue on Sidi Rezegh at dawn on the 20th. The airport was helpless and the South Africans reported a "*considerable movement*" on it. They had good reason. There was landing the Italian 20th fighter group

LA ZONA DI SIDI REZEGH

Schizzo n. 46



(eighteen G 50) from Manuba, and the aircraft were being resupplied. At 16.30, when the 6th *Royal Tanks* came from the escarpment followed by armored cars, only three aircraft were able to stand off firing on attackers, while the Commander of group could collect hastily almost all the personnel and evading capture in the vehicle. All under the eyes of two battalions of the 361st German infantry, located around hill 175, a few kilometers west of the airport. On the heels of a successful portion of the 6th *Royal Tanks* pointed toward them, but although they have few anti-tank weapons fire reaction was such that the tanks without infantry support, they soon desisted from the enterprise.

In the meantime, the bulk of the 4th Armored Brigade ⁽⁹²⁾ remained in the northeast to Gabr Saleh. During the morning the 3rd *Royal Tanks* had moved to support *the King's Dragoon Guards*, which since 08:30 was in contact with the German 3rd Recon Group, and from 14:00 repelled over the Trigh Capuzzo the enemy unit. The advance of the tanks West of Sidi Azeiz was so happy that the 3rd *Royal Tanks* poses among the axis forces deployed at the border and the *Deutsches Afrikakorps*, which has provoked concern preoccupation. But soon came a sudden and urgent orders to turn back: the 8th Hussars had been attacked by German tanks. The same order was received by the 5th *Royal Tanks*, it being close to Bir el-Hamarin, about fifteen kilometers north of Bir Gibni.

An early morning Cruwell had consulted with von Ravenstein. The latter claimed that the British had passed Trigh el Abd in force to deter the *Panzergruppe's* decisive attack against Tobruk and offered sending a consistent ensemble tactical reinforcement to the recon unit. Cruwell agreed, but, given the decisiveness with which Rommel had expressed a ban on touching the armored units, he was forced to travel to Gambut ⁽⁹³⁾. The Commander of the *Panzergruppe* saw at 11:45 and after a half-hour meeting, it was decided that the 15th *Panzerdivision* at 18:00 would move to bring southwest of Gambut, next to the 21st. This would send the 5th *PanzerRegiment* reinforced (Group Stephan) towards Gabr Saleh and annihilate enemy forces fronting the 3rd Recon Group, then passed the Trigh el Abd, continue in the direction of the border in the area of Sidi Omar. The decision represented a compromise that was risky. The enemy was restrained with some

difficulty just about fifty kilometers from Gambut; Why wait up to 18:00, i.e. well after sunset, to move the 15th *Panzerdivision*? and most importantly, why stick with a simple part of - although stronger - 21st *Panzerdivision*? If the Lt. Col. Stephan had met the entire 7th Armored Division, and this would have happened, it would be found to fight in a correlation of forces of almost 1 to 3. For his fortune faced just one third of the tanks of Gott.

Rommel had given carte blanche to Crüwell but it was not the type to ignore their enforcement of directive, therefore at 14:30 appeared in command of the 21st *Panzerdivision* to closely follow the action. The Stephan Group began immediately with 85 Pzkw III and IV and 45 Pzkw II, 20 of 105 howitzers and four pieces of 88. Arrived like an arrow on the 8th Hussars, while the Commander of the 4th Armored Brigade was subjected to an air attack. The *Panzer* opened fire at 1,300 meters, then began a furious and messy fight in which the Germans sought to prevail the increased power of the Pzkw III and IV and the British the superior speed of the *Stuart*. The rapid onset the of 5th *Royal Tanks* armored forces in the field, but Gatehouse had twenty pieces of 25 pounds (88/27) and four pieces of 2 pounds (by 40 mm), i.e. inside to the German cannons. The clashes lasted a few hours, until the fall of the evening, then the 4th Armored Brigade disengaged and diverted it South of the Trigh el Abd. Casualties were variously indicated. The Germans reported the loss of two Pzkw III and a Pzkw II, plus four Pzkw damaged ⁽⁹⁴⁾. The British claimed the loss of eleven Stuart and the other twelve damaged (recovered in a couple of days).

All in all, at dusk on the second day the situation presented to 30 Corp as favorable, at least on the basis of the information received: at Bir el Gobi-it seemed that the 22nd Armored Brigade gave a harsh lesson to the *Ariete*; at Gabr Saleh had the 4th Armored Brigade repulsed the Germans (although these were left on the battlefield); Sidi Rezegh airport was held by the 7th Armored Brigade; part of the 4th Armored Brigade had a boost until Trigh Capuzzo West of Sidi'Azeiz. Such a framework, but was gradually got into perspective, explains the sequence of dispatches sent in the afternoon from 30th Corp to the 1st South African Division: the 16:00 order to occupy Bir el Gobi-within

two hours; at 16:45 (in response to clarification requested by Gen. Brink) orders to make contact with the British units located just north of Bir el Gobi, where there were 45 enemy tanks destroyed; at 17:15: “*Stop current positions because Bir el Gobi situation is unknown. Make contact with our troops. Prepare for employment tomorrow*”; at 20:45 message meaning that at first light the next day the 22nd Armored Brigade would move from Bir el Gobi to Sidi Rezegh, where even the 1st South African had to first send a brigade. However seemed to put things right. No one could think that the *Ariete* was able to pose a real threat, and even if the state of affairs at Bir el Gobi remained obscure the South African Brigade would not find it difficult to eliminate any reason for uncertainty. The 7th Armored Division it is put true that held scattered, but his concentration at Sidi Rezegh seemed well underway. It was therefore plausible that Cunningham sent the telegram to London:

It seems that the enemy has been surprised and ignore the imminence and the violence of our attack. According to directions, but must be confirmed, it would withdraw from positions of Bardia-Salum. Until we know the line reached today by our units. You cannot say more about the armor battle going on. Personally I'm glad of the situation (etc.). ⁽⁹⁵⁾.

Uncertainty not only prevailed in the 8th Army. In command of the *Afrikakorps*, Crüwell that night examined the information received together with the Lt. Col. Bayerlein: opposing units (the 7th Armored Brigade) had pushed up near Tobruk; Another strong tactical complex (the 4th Armored Brigade) was involved in the area of Gabr Saleh with the 5th *PanzerRegiment*; a third group (the 3rd *Royal Tanks* and 1st *King's Dragoon Guards*) had bypassed Sidi Omar continuing almost until the Trigh Capuzzo. Also the composition and terminology had announced that three opposing columns were advancing northward from Giarabub (?). Von Ravenstein proposed to focus the two *Panzerdivisionen* waiting for some indication on the British maneuver because the situation was not at all clear, and there was a danger that enemy forces were numerically superior. Because directives from Gambut, was delayed to 21:00 Bayerlein phoned Gause asking explicitly orders for the next day. The answer was generic: the *Afrikakorps* was to attack and destroy the opponent already worn in Bardia-Sidi Omar-Gabr Saleh-Gambut, after which probably

would go to the South and Southwest. As for Tobruk, and the Italian XXI Corps would prevent any sortie from the fort, with their rear guaranteed from the possession of Bir Hakeim (*Trieste* Mot. Div.) and Bir el Gobi (*Ariete* Arm. Div.), the *Afrika* Division would take over of Sidi Rezegh.

Crüwell estimated worse than it actually was not the danger represented by the forces that pressed against the 3rd Recon Group, North-West of Sidi Omar, therefore, received an unexpected even though its freedom of action, at 22:30 ordered the Stephan Group moving at night by Gabr Saleh towards Sidi Omar to cut the withdrawal al predicted tactical and bulk that the 15th *Panzerdivision* falls along the Trigh Capuzzo and Sidi Azeiz far from here, at 07:00; the following morning, departed against the enemy. It was not the best decision, since in reality it was just a couple of units at the battalion level, but it ignored and if Crüwell first weighed negatively the absence of aerial reconnaissance, by another evidently the reports transmitted by 3rd Recon Group had exaggerated the situation. However Rommel, known the intentions of his main subject, not formulated objections, which means he approved. And although towards 02:00 radio communications had been intercepted in Britain from which result the 7th Armored Division was located west of the border, probably with two brigades--one at Gabr Saleh and the other at Bir el Gobi--and one infantry brigade, Rommel left the *Afrikakorps* was to squeeze into an area where they knew nothing about.

In this way the two contenders prepared to fight: Crüwell oriented towards Sidi Omar, Norrie verses Sidi Rezegh.

NOTE IN CHAPTER 6.

- (1) on 3 may, Roosevelt had informed Churchill of having available to start Middle East supplies as and when that they were available and that thirty ships were being mobilized. In June, nine American steamers unloaded in Egypt and thirty-two in July. At the end of July had been delivered about 10,000 vehicles, 84 *Stuart*, 164 tanks, 10 fighter bombers, 30 pieces of artillery, and large quantities of material.
- (2) ROOSEVELT and CHURCHILL, op. cited, pp. 172-173.
- (3) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 505-508.
- (4) depending on the appointment of a Minister of State, the position and attributions of Intendant-general suffered then, and, after the establishment of a Chief of staff for logistics at the command in Chief of the Middle East, the post of Intendant general was abolished (December 1941).
- (5) on the formal plane taking command took place on 5 July.
- (6) Letter 1.7.1941, w. CHURCHILL, op. cited, part III, vol. II, pp. 32-33.
- (7) Letter 6.7.1941, *ibid*, pp. 34-35.
- (8) *ibid.*, p. 36.
- (9)) JOHN CONNELL, *Auchinleck*, Kassel, London 1957, p. 256.
- (10) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 36.
- (11) Letter date 21.7.1941,). CONNELL, op. cited, p. 262.
- (12) Letter 23.7.1941 date W. CHURCHILL, op. cited, p. 41.
- (13) see footnote 16. The 50th Division remained the in Cyprus until the beginning of November. Replaced by the 5th Indian Division, moved to the Middle East, the 9th Army.
- (14), "Cunningham-Requested explained later Auchinleck-because I was upset from its rapid and vigorous action In Abyssinia and the apparent trend towards agile action movement. I wanted to do away with the idea that seemed to prevail, to remain clinging to the coastline and move rather freely and widely against the wings and the enemy's communications (HERALD CORRELLI BARNETT, the desert generals, Longanesi, Milano 1961, pp. 119-120).
- (15) the request was made in the first letter explicitly by Stalin on 18.7.1941, delivered by Ambassador Maiskij to Churchill the next day.
- (16) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 120.
- (17) letter of 18.10.1941, *ibid*, pp. 190-191.
- (18) plan for the British conquest of Tripolitania.
- (19) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, pp. 196-199.

- (20) *ibid*, p. 200.
- (21) roughly corresponds to the area of services of the Intendenza of the Italian legislation. For the different logistical organization, South Africa constituted a separate logistic Command.
- (22) the official name of the tank A 15, christened Crusader I, being cruiser MK VI.
- (23) more exactly *Armored Brigade Group*. The “brigade group was substantially a reinforced Brigade. In this case, the unit consisted of three tank regiments, a battalion, a motorized horse artillery regiment on 24 pieces of 25 pounds, one anti-aircraft and anti-tank.
- (24) initially were nicknamed *Honey*.
- (25) the official name was *Army Tank Brigade* (army tank Brigade).
- (26) When the Gen. Brink, Commander of the 1st South African Division, tried to postpone the date, Norrie told him explicitly that the thing had become impossible and that if the Division was not ready would change the pier with the 4th Indian Division.
- (27) the data are taken from LIDDELL HART, *The tanks cit.*, app. V.
- (28) the railway first, then waited for two New Zealand railway construction companies. Head station of Bir Misheifa was opened on 15 November.
- (29) the Grand Line of the second phase was entrusted to the General staff of the command-in-Chief.
- (30) *Dispatch on Operations in The Middle East* from November 1, 1941 to August 15, 1942, given 27.1.1943, published as a supplement to the London Gazette of 13.1.1948, app. 1.
- (31) 7th Arm. Div., 1st South Africa Inf. Div, 22nd Bd., a guards regt. heavy artillery and anti-tank field.
- (32) at first was designated the 22nd armored brigade (in coming), reinforced with one or more armored car squadrons, a campaign artillery regiment and an anti-tank battery. Later he preferred to entrust the task to the 4th armored brigade.
- (33) 1st New Zealand Inf. Div., 4th Indian Inf. Div., 4th tank Brigade, one or two artillery regiments by country and two or three heavy camp.
- (34) Study in date 28.9.1941, *Despatch* of Auchinleck cit., app. 2.
- (35) this was not the Commander of the K Corp because the day before, upon departure from Cairo to visit the relationship, Gen. Pope had crashed into the ground just off and Pope with his two generals had died in the accident.
- (36) J.A.I. HAMILTON AGAR and L.C.F TURNER *The Sidi Rezeg Battles*, 1941, Oxford University Press, Cape Town 1957, p. 64.
- (37) H.F. JOSLEN (BASS), *op. cited*, vol. I, p. 154.

- (38) J.A.I. and L.C.F. TURNER HAMTON, op. cited above, p. 66. Agar.
- (39) *ibid.*, p. 67.
- (40) C. BARNETT, op. cited above, pp. 126-127.
- (41) J.A.I. L.C.F. AGAR-HAMTON and TURNER, op. cited above, p. 69.
- (42) the Oasis Group (Gen. D.W. Reid) was the 29th Indian Brigade, the 7th South African reconnaissance battalion, the 6th South African Armored car Regiment, the III/2 Punjab Regiment, a field gun battery, an anti-aircraft and anti-tank.
- (43) Dispatch of Auchinlech, p. 376.
- (44) CHESTER WILMOT, Tobruk, p. 300.
- (45) aside from the obvious mixed composition of field supply centers, it is interesting that, where considered appropriate, transit centers and collecting stragglers, centers for traffic rules, and concentration camps for prisoners etc., namely the skeleton of a real organization of the backline.
- (46) the organic characteristic of the "Mot. Div. type A.S.I.", a binary, Constitution was the mixed anti-tank element and accompanying weapons present at all levels. So the 4th company of each battalion was ordered on several platoons of this type; the III battalion of each infantry regiment had a company from 20/35, a 47-32, a machine-gun and mortar from 81. The Division, in turn, had a battalion on a company from 20/35, a 47/32 and mortars from 81.
- (47) according to PLAYFAIR. (op. Cited above, p. 30) the tanks were 738: 32 cruisers A 11 and A 12, 62 cruisers A13, 210 *Crusader*, 173 *Stuart* with the 30th Corp; 3 *cruisers* A 13 and 132 (*Matilda* and *Valentine*) infantry tanks with 13th Corp; 32 *cruisers*, 25 light tanks and 69 *Matilda* at Tobruk.
- According to LINDDEL HART (op. cited, p. 102) were 756 tanks: 336 *cruisers* of various types, 195 *Stuart*, 225 between *Matilda* and *Valentine*. It is assumed they were all efficient.
- According to J.A.I. AGAR HAMTON and TURNER (op. cited, p. 36) tanks were 773: 535 *cruisers* and *Stuart*, and 213 *Valentine* and *Matilda* 25 light tanks. Moreover, the same authors provide different data afterwards: 106 *cruisers* of various types, 229 *Crusader* and 165 *Stuart* for a total of 500 wagons instead of 535 (*ibid*, p. 53).
- (48) it was ongoing to repair tanks for damage and various changes: 92 *cruisers* of different types and *Crusader*, 90 *Stuart* and 77 *Matilda* and *Valentine*. Were considered to be available at a rate of 40 per day.
- (49) the convoy was carrying 124 *Crusader* r, 80 *Stuart* and 52 *Valentine*, all, with the exception of the latter, for the 1st Armored Division. According to Liddell Hart tanks at sea were 96 for the 8th Army and 231 for the 1st and 10th Armored Divisions and therefore did not consider.
- (50) In particular: 35 Pzkw IV, 139 Pzkw III, 70 Pzkw II, 5 of war prizes and 146 M 13. Are not calculated for obvious reasons of inconsistency technique, 162 light tanks distributed among Italian divisions. The German media were very few repair, but do not know the exact number. The Italians were 8 M 13 and 25 light tanks.
- (51) In reality, for the British the real competitive tanks were the 174 Pzkw III and IV, which would bring the initial report to over 4 to 1 t to their advantage.

- (52) The Germans had 35 pieces 88: 23 at the border and 12 with the *Afrikakorps*.
- (53) About 96 existed, all concentrated in the *Afrikakorps*.
- (54) Among the measures aimed at improving the protection of the tanks there was only the part of the frontal armor, but also the setting of the armor itself into the most sensitive. Deeming likely adopting similar practices by the British, the Germans had introduced the use of a hood piercing that avoided the crush of small caliber bullets against a hardened or reinforced armored. By contrast, the British throughout 1941 remained ignored both the first and the second trick.
- (55) From mid-October to mid-November were sent to front-line Groups more than 230 airplanes for replacement.
- (56) any group had supplied 18 airplanes and another 7 were held in reserve.
- (57) I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 14. According to the photographic reconnaissance and information collected, the Italian Comando Superiore assessed the British air force 185 bombers and 310 fighters West of ed-Daba and 175 bombers to the East of that town.
- (58) the calculation of the Italian-German availability did not consider the reservations, allegedly amounting to about half of aircraft online.
- (59) during the period October 14-17 November the *Western Desert Air Force* employed an average of 80 aircraft per day. Lost altogether 59 bombers and 26 fighter.
- (60) I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 15.
- (61) these units, 6 groups and 2 squadrons were South Africans, 2 Groups Australians, one Rhodesian and one of Free France.
- (62) I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 18.
- (63) W. CHURCHUL, op. Cited above, p. 208. But instead of squadrons will wish to groups, such as the translation of squadrons. To detect which according to RICHARDS and SANDERS (Royal Air Force, H.M.S.O., London 1956, vol. II, p. 173), Tedder had operational: 49 observation groups 29 with the *Western Desert Air Force*, 9 in Malta and 11 in the Suez Canal zone.
- (64) G. SANTORO, op. cited, p. 110.
- (65) DSCSAS, the situation presented by the fifth air fleet.
- (66) J.A.I. and L.C.F. TURNER HAMTON, op. Cited above, p. 103.
- (67) W. CHURCHUL, op. cited above, p. 209.
- (68) H.G. VON ESEBECK, op. cited above, p. 39-40.
- (69) Gambara had ordered to form with elements of the infantry "areas of real and true arrest", to organize the ground with diamond-shaped strongholds, to incorporate these all 75 pieces, keeping the tanks at the ready.

(70) H.O. BEHRENDT, op. cited, p. 126.

(71) it was at 7th Armored brigade.

(72) it was the 4th Armored brigade.

(73) DSCSAS, date 18.11.1941.

(74) DSCSAS, tele/19401 01/0 p. date 18.11.1941.

(75) For appropriate clarity, it should be noted that there were three places called Sidi Omar, all close together. Sidi Omar (hill 203), called by the English Sidi Omar was a Libyan quadrivium runs a couple of miles west of the border grid; Sidi Omar again (hill 202) was close to the wire just over four kilometers north-east of the former; Bir Sidi Omai (hill 200) was a well, which is at the border but in Egyptian territory. Italian industry defenses occupied Sidi Omar and Sidi Omar again.

(76) the results of the interrogation were immediately disclosed, in command of *Savona* and transmitted to Comando Superiore, while the German liaison officer sent them to Bardia, in command of the *Afrikakorps*. The war diary of the German Corps at 23:00 was written:

''' The German liaison officer with the *Savona* Division communicates the results of the interrogation of a British soldier captured at Sidi Omar. It appears from this that the 7th Armored Division has already passed West of the wire, the 4th Indian Division is located on both sides of the wire and two South African divisions are moving from Marsa Matruk westward (...). This report was transmitted by the Panzergruppe information officer's, which regarded the news as not trusted.»

According to another version, fancy, the entire crew of the medium would have been captured at Sidi Suleiman by a German recon unit, brought at Bardia and questioned personally by Bayerlein. The non-commissioned Officer commanding the tank had with him a map with the *Crusader* (!) plan and stated that Rommel's plan against Tobruk was in the hands of the Commander in Chief of the Middle East (p. CARELL, op. cited, p. 1217).

(77) The thought can be S.I.M. only the 7th Armored Division, much strengthened, represented in two columns, though for about ten days the “enemy“ situation considered the existing 7th and 2nd (or 3rd) Armored Division.

(78) P. CARELL, op. cited above, pp. 97-116.

(79) Ibid., p. 111.

(80) Ibid, pp. 113-114.

(81) C. AUCHINLECK, Despatch cit., pp. 334-335. Then-talking about the preparations for the battle of Ain el Gazala-added: “had been captured a document containing the enemy's plan for the attack on Tobruk in November 1941 and it revealed that Rommel considered the capture of Tobruk as fundamental to the preliminary advance into Egypt” (p. 353).

(82) C. BARNETT, op. cited above, p. 133.

(83) the exact name of the town is Bir el Gubi. By now the foot el-Gobi, spreading to the point of being officially accepted.

- (84) for the reconstruction of the battle fought in Marmarica in November-December 1941 was held particularly against of J.A.I works very accurate. L.C.F AGAR-HAMILTON and TURNER (The Sidi Rezeg battles, 1941 mentioned) and MICHAEL CARVER, Tobruk, Baldini e Castoldi, Milano 1966.
- (85) I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 39.
- (86) J.A.I. L.C.F AGAR-HAMILTON and TURNER, op. cited above, p. 133.
- (87) *ibid.*, p. 134.
- (88) see footnote 16.
- (89) The 22nd Armored Brigade consisted of: Brigade Command (8 *Crusader*), 2nd *Royal Gloucestershire Hussard's* (52 *Crusader* and 4 close support tanks), 3rd *County of London Yeomanry* (52 *Crusader* and 4 close support tanks), 4th *County of London Yeomanry* (43 *Crusader* and close support tanks 5), a partner of the 1st Battalion *King's Royal Rifle Corps*, a battery of horse artillery 40 (8 pieces from 25 pounds), an anti-tank section from 2 pounds and a light anti-aircraft battery.
- (90) R.H. W.S. HASTINGS, *The Rifle Brigade in the Second World War 1939-1945*, Gale and Polden, 1950, p. 83, reported by Agar-Hamilton and Turner, op. cited above, p. 137.
- (91) J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 139.
- (92) the 4th Armored Brigade consisted of: Brigade Command (10 *Stuart*), 8th *King's Royal Irish Hussards* (51 *Stuart*), 3rd *Royal Tank* (52 *Stuart*), 5th *Royal Tank* (52 *Stuart*), the battalion *Scots Guards*, 2nd horse artillery (24 pieces from 25 pounds), 102nd riding anti-tank artillery, light anti-aircraft battery.
- (93) the command of the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* had moved to the Gambut area.
- (94) according to the British, Stephan Group's losses amounted to some 19 tanks and another 26 likely.
- (95) J. CONNELL., op. cited above, p. 342.

Chapter Seventh THE FIRST BATTLE OF SIDI REZEGH

1. THE COMBAT FOR THE AIRPORT OF SIDI REZEGH (20-22 NOVEMBER).

On 20 November, at daybreak, Cunningham left Norrie and flew back to his advanced Command, located now at a dozen kilometers east of fort Maddalena. The Chief of staff, Gen. Galloway, made the point to the situation, as it was known. The most prominent news was a surprising report of the *Western Desert Air Force*. Between 13 and 16 the previous day, on the occasion of bombing missions conducted along the coastline, had been noticed a conspicuous westward movement of vehicles: from Bardia towards Tobruk, from Tobruk to Gazala, el-Adem to Acroma ⁽¹⁾. Could be a symptom interpretable in two ways diametrically opposed: the *Afrikakorps* in retreat beyond Tobruk or Italian infantry divisions were removed from the battlefield in which the *Afrikakorps* was preparing to address 30 Corp. The first hypothesis was that that was the greatest credit and feel that Rommel wanted to rearrange its forces west of Tobruk lasted throughout the following week. However the Commander of the 8th Army was brooding. Too many fragmentary news not featured a comprehensive framework and, above all, there was always the nightmare did not perceive any real symptom of Rommel's reaction. However, for the time being there was that to wait the results of Gott.

The attention of the Commander of the 7th Armored Division was directed essentially towards Sidi Rezegh and Gabr Saleh. In the first place was preceded by the German initiative. In the late afternoon before the initial communications about the British presence behind the axis of the wire around Tobruk led to urgent measures. The worst news was the loss of the airstrip of Sidi Rezegh and destruction of the Italian 20th fighter group. In that regard, on Rommel's command staff, on Gen. Gloria had put in motion towards Sidi Rezegh the I/39th infantry and a group of the 205th *Bologna* artillery to engage the enemy, awaiting the arrival of the *Afrika* Division.

The dispositions issued by the *Panzergruppe* ordered at 23:20 of the 19th were aimed at stronger reactivity:

“(...) 2. *Panzergruppe Afrika* 20 Nov. will annihilate the enemy wedged west of Sidi Omar. It will hold the line Sollum-Bardia and will reject any enemy sortie attempted from Tobruk.

3. The DAK (15th and 21st *Panzerdivision*) will attack the opponent 20 Nov advancing between Bir Bu Hamar and Sidi Omar and destroy with the greatest speed possible. The Corp will be so ready for a new change of front in presumable westbound and Southwest.

4. The XXI Corps will prevent any attempt to sortie from Tobruk. Z.B.V. *Afrika* Division will attack at dawn on 20 Nov the enemy at Sidi Rezegh and destroy (...)”.

The *Savona* and Bardia-Halfaya sector had to defend their positions of the border and the Army Corps of maneuver, with the *Ariete* and the *Trieste*, keep Bir el Gobi and Bir Hakeim.

Meanwhile Navarini had alarmed the XXI Corps. The *Pavia* ⁽²⁾, which had the II/27th infantry posted on blockade belt between *Bologna* and the *Afrika*, suspended all preparations for the attack, was taking a defensive deployment in a semi-circle, South of the crossroads of the el-Adem, face South and Southeast, to block the roadway Bir el Gobi-el-Adem. *Bologna* ⁽³⁾, by order of composition and terminology, had to use troops not employed in the sub sector of Bir Bu Asatein-that is precisely the opposite of the British attack-to organize a defense, facing Southeast. some positions that controlled the road axis: II/39th infantry and XXV engineer battalion in Belhamed Magen; II/40th infantry, between the via Balbia and landing strip Bu Amud; the light tank company South of Bu Amud. The *Trento* was advised of the possibility of an enemy sortie from Tobruk towards el Adem.

At first light of the 20th the *Afrika* Division tried to liquidate quickly the task entrusted to it, but it wasn't what recently. It was basically improvised and its homogeneity left somewhat to be desired, and the action could not be affected by an organization “the drum”. II/55th German infantry was at the beginning of the Sidi Rezegh Ridge, to the West, and the 361st infantry occupied the heights of Hill 175, dominant northeast of the airfield. The operation was not carried out in a single framework: at approximately 06:30 moved the 155th infantry, at 08:00 the 361st. Both attempts were repulsed without excessive difficulty. The situation was rather strange: Gen. Davy held with his tanks the

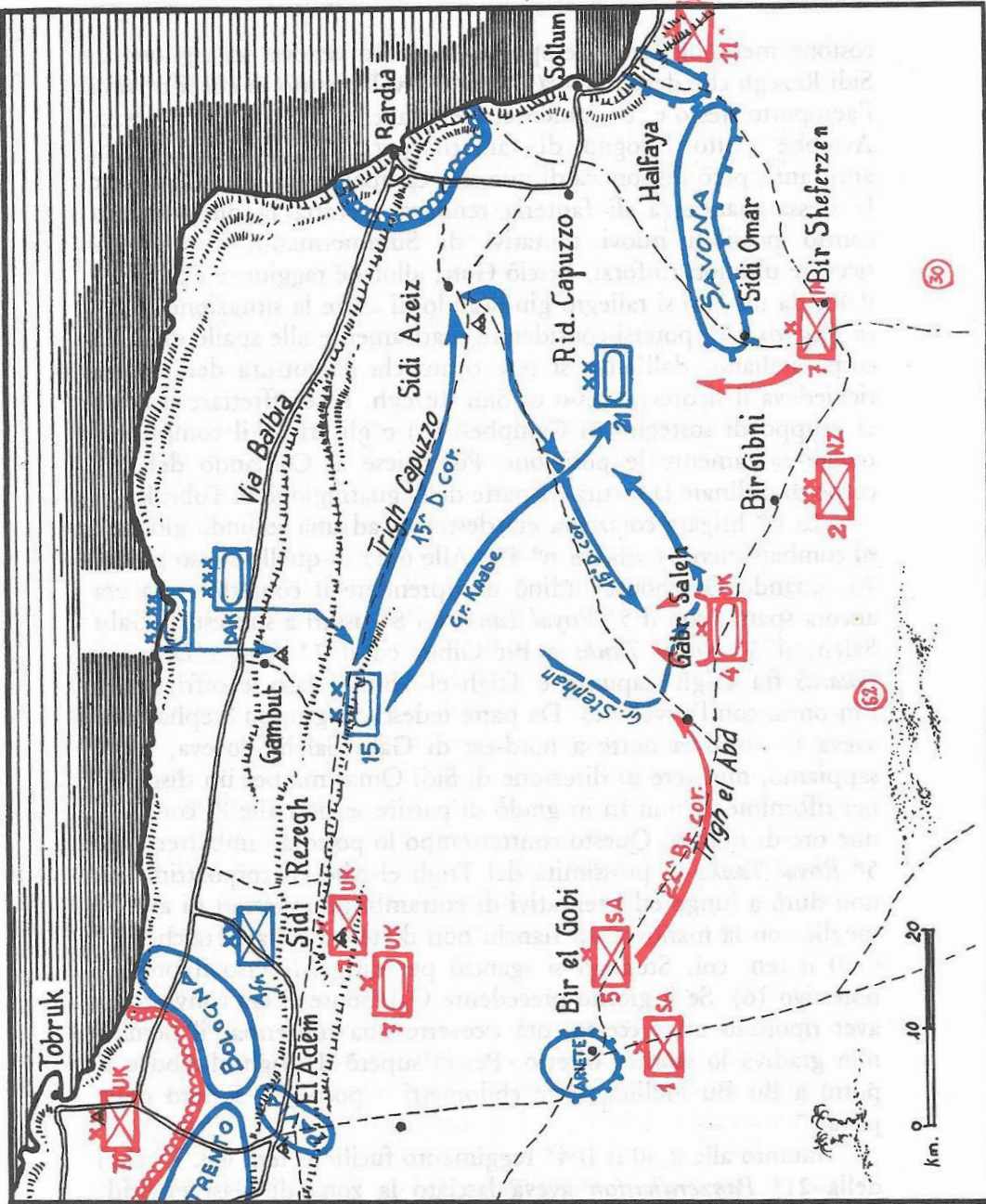
southern Ridge and the airport, but soon saw the Sidi Rezegh Ridge that led to North the depression where the airport itself and, of course, less still of Capuzzo. Infantry would have needed to occupy the positions in front, but he had only one company ⁽⁴⁾. On the other hand the same lack of infantry made precarious the static defense against possible new Sümmermann attempts, he could receive more reinforcements. So Gott, when reached Davy, at 09:40, on the one hand, rejoiced judging the situation "*well in hand*" and to consider practically behind the XXI Italian Corps, on the other hand, realized that the breaking of the siege was the sure possession of Sidi Rezegh. Did hasten the pace to Campbell's support group ⁽⁵⁾ and gave him the task to hold the positions. Then the 30th Corp asked to order the sortie by the garrison of Tobruk.

The 4th Armored Brigade was destined to a second day of fighting (sketch n° 47). At 06:45 to that same day 20th, when Gatehouse ordered to resume contact, it was still strewn with the 5th *Royal Tanks* and the 8th Hussars Southeast of Gabr Saleh, the 3rd *Royal Tanks* Bir Gibni and 1st *King's Dragoon Guards* between the Trigh Capuzzo and Trigh el Abd. The case offered the meeting with the opponent. From the German side, the Stephan Group who had spent the night northeast of Gabr Saleh, was, as we know, move in the direction of Sidi Omar but for a mistake in supplies was unable to start if not at 08:00, with about two hours late. This setback led to come in 5th *Royal Tanks* near the Trigh el Abd. The fight didn't last long and the attempts of both opponents have the upper hand with maneuver on the flanks gave no result, so at 09:30 the Lt. Col. Stephan freed himself to head towards his objective ⁽⁶⁾. If the previous day Gatehouse was convinced he had a hit, now received a confirmation: the enemy did not want direct confrontation. Therefore overcame Trigh el Abd and brought to Bir Bu Meliha, seven miles or so North of the runway.

Meanwhile at 08:30 the 104th rifle regiment (Lt. Col. Knabe) of 21st *Panzerdivision* had left the area by Gasr el Arid-directed towards Sidi Omar. At the height of the track from Sidi Azeiz advances to Gabr Saleh, the elements headed reported the presence of one thirty enemy tanks. Knabe stopped and called for help. The 15th *Panzerdivision* of Neumann-Silkow, which

L'INTERVENTO DELL'AFRIKAKORPS A GABR SALEH
(20 novembre)

Schizzo n. 47



Sidi Azeiz had come, curve towards the Southwest while von Ravenstein recalled the Stephan Group to the northeast. The same Crüwell intervened. Wanted to make sure personally. Soon arrived at the conviction of dealing simply with reconnaissance units equipped with a few tanks, it was, in fact, of the *King's Dragoon Guards*, which covered with space patrols between the Trigh, facing Northwest-decided the concentration and the reorganization of the two divisions in the area of Gabr Lachem. In particular difficulty was the 21st *Panzerdivision* whose tanks had run out of ammunition and fuel. The early morning raids were ultimately proved fruitful for both the meeting of *Deutsches Afirkakorps*-although the 21st *Panzerdivision* was temporarily immobilized-it's why now Crüwell was beginning to see clear: in his opinion, the 7th armoured Division was directed on Tobruk with the vanguard already at Sidi Rezegh and an armored formation to Gabr Saleh to cover the flank. What was the importance of British forces in the area of Sidi Omar, there wasn't much to worry about, because presumably they were infantry units. Therefore, at 14:30 a report of von Ravenstein summoned and Neumann-Silkow, illustrated their ideas and ordered according to break on the right of the enemy with the intact and ready 15th *Panzerdivision*.

But the collection of *Afirkakorps* southwest of Sidi Azeiz had not escaped the English. The event was a particular concern that were looking out to Cunningham on the vulnerability of the 7th Armored Division, and at noon he warn Norrie about the danger constituted by two *Panzerdivisions*, which almost certainly within an hour would attack the 4th Armored Brigade to the North-East of Gabr Saleh. The less committed unit was the 22nd Armored Brigade-so, the *Ariete* was certainly still shaken for the blow of 19 and the 1st South African Brigade would not encounter difficulties at Bir el Gobi-and then was called to the rescue by Gatehouse. Finally the German reaction was manifesting. Unfortunately neither of the two contenders stood under the conditions wanted. Crüwell was forced to commit a single Division, at least for the time being; Cunningham saw the impending attack of two *Panzerdivisionen*-so at least he believed – against one Armored Brigade, maybe two if the 22nd had cleared up quickly and even more quickly had been able to exceed forty kilometers of wilderness and if, at the same time, the Germans had moved slowly.

Intervened, unexpected, a proposal of Godwin-Austen, the

Commander of 13 Corps. Had followed the unfolding of events and felt the pulse of Freyberg, the New Zealand Division which was stopping at Bir Gibni, ten kilometers from Gatehouse. So he communicated to Cunningham and Norrie who the 4th Armored Brigade, where it had lain in trouble, you could collect on New Zealanders who were well organized and had the 8th *Royal Tanks* equipped with the new *Valentine*. Freyberg had shown enthusiastic, much to declare themselves-in a telephone conversation with Norrie-ready to move with all the Division alongside the 4th Armored Brigade or give this a solid foothold: “*we are omnipotent!*”. Also sent a patrol to offer new support to Gatehouse, but strangely declined. It was conjectured that that refusal had two reservations mental weight: “*first of all, the entire floor of the 8th Army had so far employed as article of faith that the 13th Corps had no role in the battle of tanks. Secondly, the theory on the use of armor in Egypt was dominated, despite the presence of experienced officers, from the principle that the tanks should be left to fight their battle without resorting to the help of a mundane Infantry Division*”⁽⁷⁾.

Next for Gatehouse were clearly far from rosy, but luck would help him. Against him only Neumann-Silkow advanced with the 8th *PanzerRegiment* in the head and the 15th rifle Brigade behind. At 16:30 began a fight that the 4th Brigade was able to sustain for about an hour before falling back. At dusk, the 22nd Armored Brigade: greeted by the fire of German anti-tank pieces, also soon had to retreat. The 15th *Panzerdivision* not accused losses; the British were sensitive balance. The 4th Brigade, who three days earlier had passed the border with 165 *Stuart*, had remained with 97 tanks (but had yet to recover those damaged the 19th and not yet fixed) and the 22nd, who had planted a number of submissions from Bir el Gobi to Gabr Saleh, from the initial 155 *Crusader* had dropped to a hundred in total.

If the engagement was not decisive consequences⁽⁸⁾, this is due in part to lack of concentration of the 7th Armored Division and partly also the intervention of a formation of bombers of the *Western Desert Air Force*. Come over Gabr Saleh, the pilots were unable to distinguish friends from enemies and

had to return to base with the load of bombs intact. During the afternoon, however, British leaders had received such a hard decision to explain. Around noon all considered imminent tank battle in the area of Gabr Saleh according to the balance of power of which hath been spoken, yet Norrie let persuade by Gott to claim Cunningham's approval for the operation, as it was called *Pop* the sortie from Tobruk, and Cunningham at 16:00, agreed. But there's more. Norrie dispose that the 5th Brigade of South Africa to accelerate the movement towards Sidi Rezegh before dawn the next day, feeling his presence in sufficient place for the purposes of successful sortie, While the original design called for the intervention of the entire 1st South African Division. The South Africans were pretty much waiting for events. On the day the 1st Brigade had Pienaar's push towards Bir el Gobi. Soon fall under the artillery fire of *Ariete*, about 10:00 had explained all his forces, assuming a static attitude. In that while Brink was ordered Norrie to occupy Bir el Gobi and the positions of Bir el-Taieb Esem (twenty kilometers to the Southeast, on the Trigh el Abd) and prepare to send a reinforced Brigade to support the support group at Sidi Rezegh-provisions which basically confirmed the latest directives of the night before-as well as a new orientation: If he had encountered serious difficulties at Bir el Gobi should not risk unnecessary losses. It was enough to just to "*control*" the enemy, preventing him from making bets against the communication lines of 30th Corps. At 11:45, new dispatch Norrie: given the employment of Sidi Rezegh, the "*control*" of Bir el Gobi remained urgent, but at the same time the South Africans had to be prepared to cooperate with the 7th Armored Division at Sidi Rezegh, the sortie of the garrison of Tobruk scheduled for the following day. A four minutes after the 22nd Armored Brigade-call suddenly to Gabr Saleh to the rescue of the 4th Armored Brigade - warn the command of the 1st South African Brigade which was about to leave. Of course, Pienaar, who was unaware of the overall situation, turned immediately to Brink: the departure of the British tanks left discovered the right flank in the presence of enemy armored units that was unaware of the entity; an attack with infantry in similar conditions would have resulted in unnecessary loss, so to stop Scott-Cockburn.

Faced with a vague reply to Brink, Pienaar replied then that of the attack on Bir el Gobi was not appropriate to talk to

because of changes in the directives to the 22nd Armored Brigade and the lack of precise information on the *Ariete*. At most, he could try to get more news on the opponent through the use of night patrols, intending to attack the next day, if possible of course. At this point Brink wanted to warn 30 Corp (14:40 hours), which is limited to confirm the order to “*lock*” Bir el Gobi.

If the 1st South African Brigade was uncomfortable with the obvious disproportion between available forces and task (one infantry brigade was to control an Armored Division!), the Mission of the 5th Brigade of Gen. Armstrong never went very smooth. Due to one of the frequent interruptions in temporary radio links, Brink had received (13:30 hours) the Executive order to send the unit to Sidi Rezegh through a communication of Gott, who stated to make the movement before dusk. They spent four hours, or less, before Armstrong placed into gear, so at 18:00 stopped just a few miles beyond the Trigh el Abd. While acknowledging legitimate concerns that the lack of acclimatization to the desert was rising about a nocturnal movement, you have to wonder if the importance of the operation that the 7th Armored Division would start the next day at dawn was not such as to suggest to accept-if not by imposing-certain risks.

That evening Gott returned to examine the area of Sidi Rezegh airfield and complete the plan: at first light of the day would attack with infantry the edge of hill 175 to get vista and domain of shot on the Trigh Capuzzo and on the axis Road and open the way to passage of tanks on ed Duda, where he would be contacted the forces of Gen. Scobie outputs from Tobruk. The coordination of the action of the support group and the 7th Armored Brigade was entrusted to the Commander of the latter, Davy. For his part, Watts was ready. With a tank Brigade and detachments of two infantry brigades would open a corridor up to ed Duda.

In short, the situation appeared so favorable that Norrie considered to be the latest beats. In the North there was only to exploit the advantage gained at Sidi Rezegh, where at the airport the 5th South African Brigade was enough at 08:15 were rather than 07:00 to permanently cut Rommel to Tobruk. To the South it was liquidating the *Afrikakorps* or pursues him relentlessly if property was withdrawn: task that 4th and 22nd Armored Brigade could accomplish easily, starting respectively from Bir Bu

Meliha and Gabr Saleh. Similar optimism, we must recognize it, was somewhat exaggerated, especially taking into account that the two brigades had suffered material losses-were left with a hundred tanks each-and that address the entire *Deutsches Afrikakorps* couldn't be considered unimportant affair. It is also strange that Cunningham, who seems to have ignored the non-acceptance of the offer of collaboration of the New Zealand Division by Norrie, did not however he thought to call a part of the 13th Corp to close in a vise Crüwell.

Italian and German commands were hardly the conduct of events. Bastico, especially, could receive a few and fragmentary news from Gambarà, who could know just what German liaison officers-also not very oriented to the truth-communicated. The same information of *Ariete*, the Italian's most advanced great units, were not always accurate and even led to unnecessary movements of units. In the late afternoon, while still the 15th *Panzerdivision* was committed to driving back the 4th and 22nd Armored Brigade, under the command of the *Afrikakorps* appeared clear convenience, *ante omnia*, bring together the 21st *Panzerdivision* at the 15th with a nightly transfer; then could break ground on the sides and on the back of the enemy processing on Tobruk. Crüwell informed, therefore, Rommel of about withdraw South to resolve the question of the fortified town. The moment was hard. Just then had torn the veil of uncertainty: the radio news issued by the BBC at 21:00 had announced that the “8th Army with about 75,000 men began the General offensive in the Western Desert with the intent to destroy German and Italian forces in Africa”. Including the true character of the threat on Tobruk, Rommel Crüwell proposals accepted without hesitation.

It is interesting to highlight the disconnect between the top and the two German Commands on the reconstruction of the enemy situation. On the evening of 20 November the topographic maps of the Comando Superiore considered in Marmarica two British armored divisions (sketch No. 48). the 7th, spread between Sidi Rezegh and Gabr Saleh, and the 3rd (or the 20th), grouped in the East to Gabr Saleh ⁽⁹⁾. You do not know exactly what was the German thinking about, but it seems that the 20th the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* had a tightly to reality and that collectively, the existence of a second armored division

⁽¹⁰⁾.

An explanation can be found in both greater pessimism in Italian better appreciation of the German armored units. There were no doubts about the presence of the 7th Armored Division, however while the Italian intelligence service had obviously thought that the brigades were not non-divisional units to another Division, the German command had accepted the existence of autonomous brigades or nearly so. However, the British tanks were located mainly in two areas: a mass towards Sidi Rezegh and the other near Gabr Saleh. Knowing the real situation, you could detect the convenience to destroy first the Gabr Saleh, already meets and won that afternoon, and then turn North, seizing on the fly the opportunity to eliminate the enemy piece by piece. But judging from the sketch compiled by Rommel presumably on the evening of the 20th (see next page reproduction) ⁽¹¹⁾, it seems that the Commander's *Panzergruppe* thought already out played the armored mass to the east.

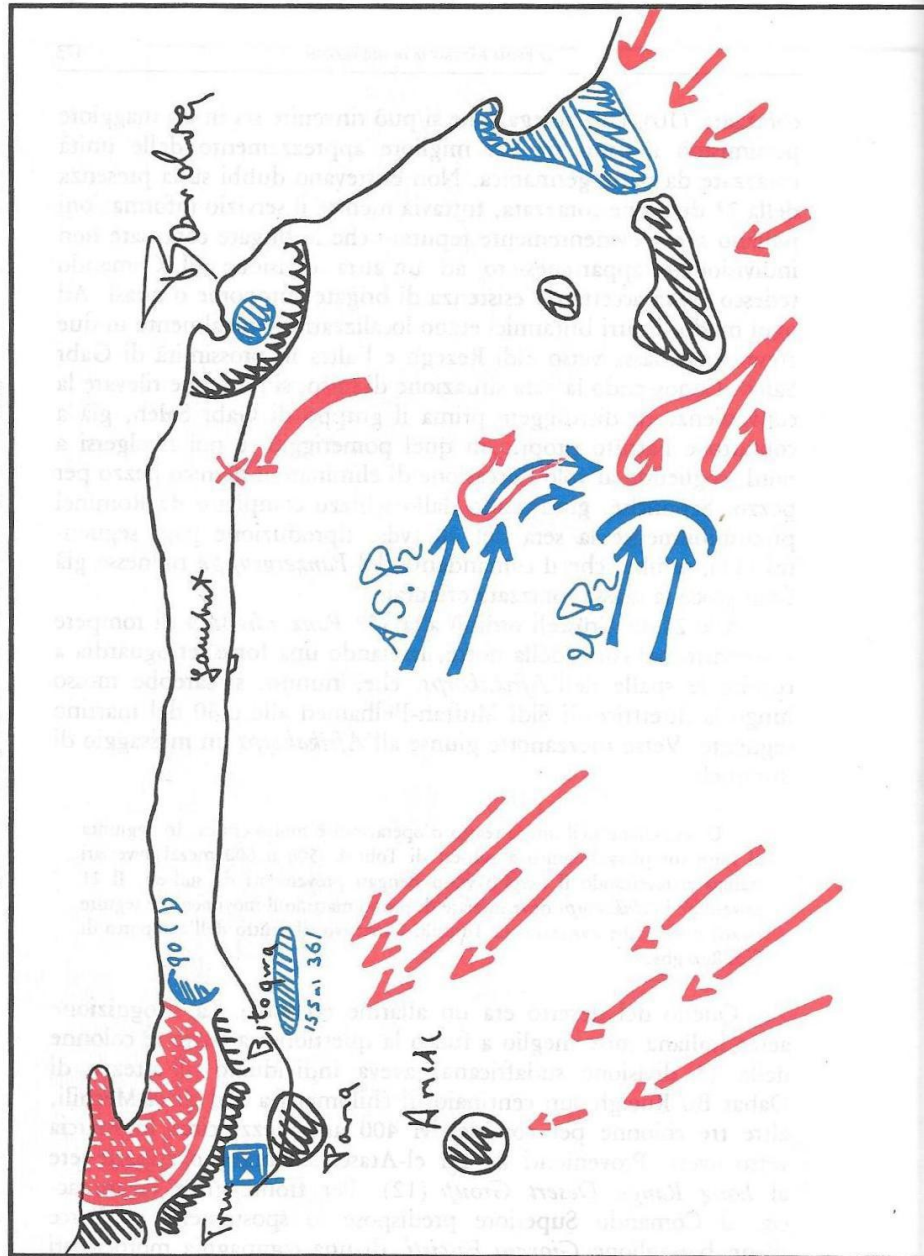
At 22:15 Crüwell ordered the 15th *Panzerdivision* to break the contact during the night, leaving a strong rearguard to cover the rear of the *Afrikakorps*, which, together, would have moved along the Sidi Muftah-Belhamed at 06:30 the following morning. Around midnight he arrived at Rommel's *Afrikakorps* a message:

“The situation throughout the theatre of operations is very critical. In addition to strong enemy complex Southeast of Tobruk, 500 or 600 enemy vehicles are crossing the desert to Benghazi from the Southeast. On 21 November the *Afrikakorps* must begin early in the morning and follow the movement of enemy tanks advancing on Tobruk. Objective: the Centre of Sidi Rezegh”.

The desert was an excessive alarm. The Italian put better aerial reconnaissance over the question: apart from the columns of the 1st South African Division had identified at Bu Rueigh, Dahar a hundred kilometers south of el-Mechili, other three columns for a total of 400 vehicles about marching westward. From Bir el-Atasc, seemed to be a member of the *Long Range Desert Group* ⁽¹²⁾. To counter the threat, the Comando Superiore he laid out moving to Barce of a *Giovani Fascisti* battalion, a company of P.A.I bikers and a carabineer Parachute Battalion recon grouping ⁽¹³⁾, which was moved to el-Adem.

Hand drawn Sketch of Rommel
about the Situation in Marmarica on 20 November 1941
(Da E. Rommel, *Guerra senza odio*, Garzanti, Milano 1959)

SCHIZZO AUTOGRAFO DI ROMMEL
SULLA SITUAZIONE IN MARMARICA IL 20 NOVEMBRE 1941
(Da E. ROMMEL, *Guerra senza odio*, Garzanti, Milano 1959).



21 NOVEMBER.

At first light on the 21st all took their movement, in the North as in the South. And, once again, the most incredible assumptions altered reality.

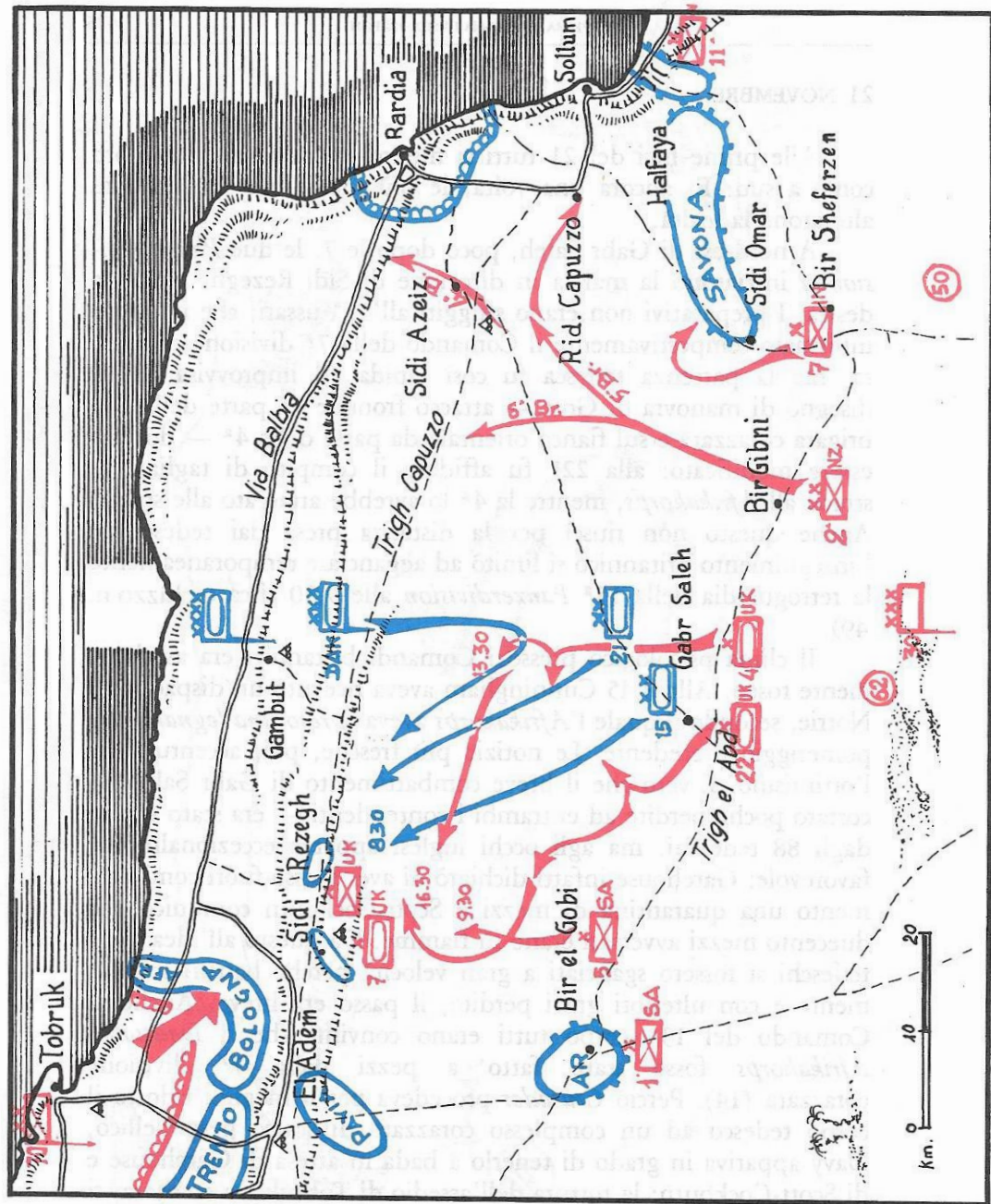
Northeast of Gabr Saleh, shortly after 07:00, the two *Panzerdivision* began their march into towards Sidi Rezegh, the 21st on the right. The preparations were not escaped the 11th Hussars, who had promptly informed the command of 7th Armored Division, but the departure was so sudden and rapid maneuver design Gott-frontal attack by the 22nd Armored Brigade and on the eastern side by the 4th had to be changed: the 22nd was tasked to cut off the road to the *AfrikaKorps*. While the 4th attacked him from behind. This also failed and the distance taken by the Germans and the British pursuit was limited to hook the rear of temporarily 15th *Panzerdivision* at about 09:30 (sketch No. 49).

The psychological climate among the British Command was absolutely rosy. At 08:45 Cunningham had received a dispatch from in Norrie, whereby the *AfrikaKorps* had "taken a woody" in the afternoon before. The coolest news, then, would accentuate the optimism. It is true that the brief combat of Gabr Saleh-cost few casualties to both sides-had been solved by the German 88, but British eyes appeared exceptionally favorable: Gatehouse in fact claimed to have knocked out about 40 vehicles and Scott-Cockburn said that two hundred enemy vehicles were in flames. From this the idea that Germans were unhooked at great speed because beaten soundly and with further heavy losses, the step was short. Even under all 13 Corps believed that the *Deutsches AfrikaKorps* was torn apart by the 7th Armored Division⁽¹⁴⁾. Therefore proceeded to the best *Crusader*: reduced the German Corp for a complex low-weight armored combat, Davy was able to keep it at Bay awaiting Gatehouse and Scott-Cockburn; the breaking of the siege of Tobruk was granted; you could therefore kick off at 13th Corp. This was the opinion of Norrie.

In the Tobruk area everything was started according to the forecasts. During the night, the 70th Division units had done preliminary operations, and marked the

GLI AVVENIMENTI DEL 21 NOVEMBRE

Schizzo n. 49



passages through the minefields and tossed four bridges across the anti-tank ditch. At dawn, while the Polish Brigade and the 23rd British Brigade put up diversionary actions on the Western front of the fort, the 32nd tank Brigade with part of the 14th and 16th Infantry Brigade ⁽¹⁵⁾ began the sortie to achieve positions of ed-Duda, who controlled the axis Road and Trigh Capuzzo. Were not adequate forces to break the besieging circle or to reach the goal and even keep it if conquered, however remember that the bulk of the effort was to be made by 30 Corps and that the plan called for the intervention of the entire 1st South African Division and above all a tactical environment absolutely favor: the mass enemy armored destroyed and infantry troops German-Italian disaster shocks. Instead *Pop* was developing in completely different circumstances. It started with a short but intense aerial bombardment, then the 32nd tank Brigade began moving in the direction of Carmuset Beludeah. The first targets were named *Butch* left and *Jill* in front of (sketch No. 50). *Butch*, a German stronghold where the 7^o Royal Tanks lost many tanks and nearly all *Bren carriers*, was busy at 08:50, but *Jill* caused an abrupt stop, glance why the 4th Royal Tanks fell into a minefield. The intervention of the II *Black Watch*, who took the stronghold with the bayonet with considerable losses, started to move the situation. But the sortie was already gasping.

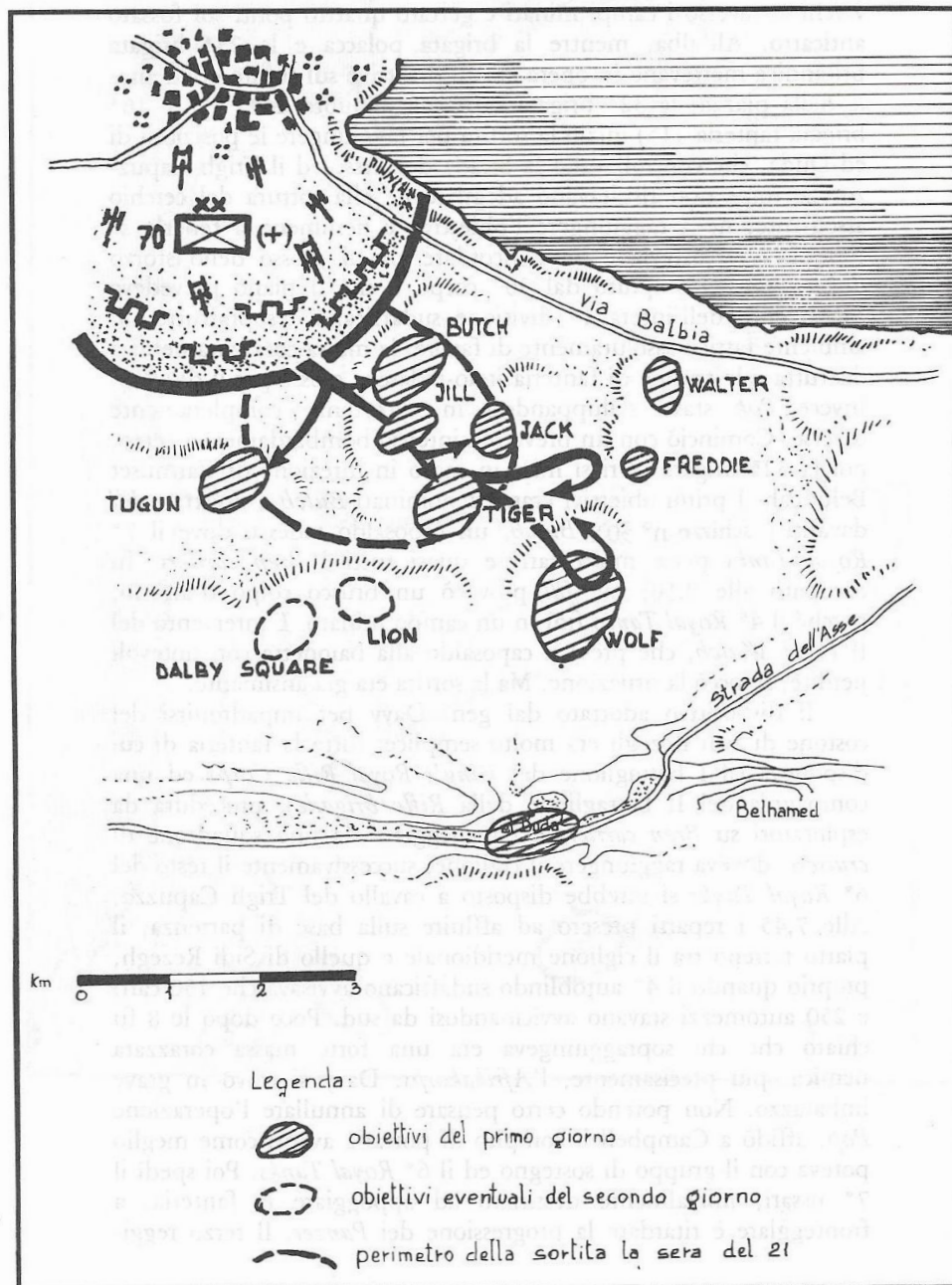
The deployment adopted by Gen. Davy to seize the Sidi Rezegh Ridge was very simple: all available infantry (the I Battalion *King's Royal Rifle Corps* and a company of the II Battalion of the *Rifle Brigade*), processed by explorers on *Bren carriers* and flanked by a squadron of *cruisers*, should reach the Ridge; then the rest of the 6th Royal Tanks would be willing to turn of the Trigh Capuzzo.

At 07:45 units began to flow on the base, the land between the South and the ridge of Sidi Rezegh, just when the 4th South African armored cars advised that 150 tanks and 250 vehicles were approaching from the South. Shortly after 08:00 it was clear that whoever was the oncoming strong enemy armor mass: more precisely, the *Afrikakorps*. Davy was in grave embarrassment. Unable to think of certain cancel *Pop*, entrusted to Campbell to bring it forward as best they could with the support group and the 6th Royal Tanks. Then he sent the 7th Hussars, originally intended to support the infantry, to confront and delaying progression of the *Panzer*. The Third armored Regiment,

. The sortie of the garrison of Tobruk (21 November)

LA SORTITA DELLA GUARNIGIONE DI TOBRUK
(21 novembre)

Schizzo n. 50



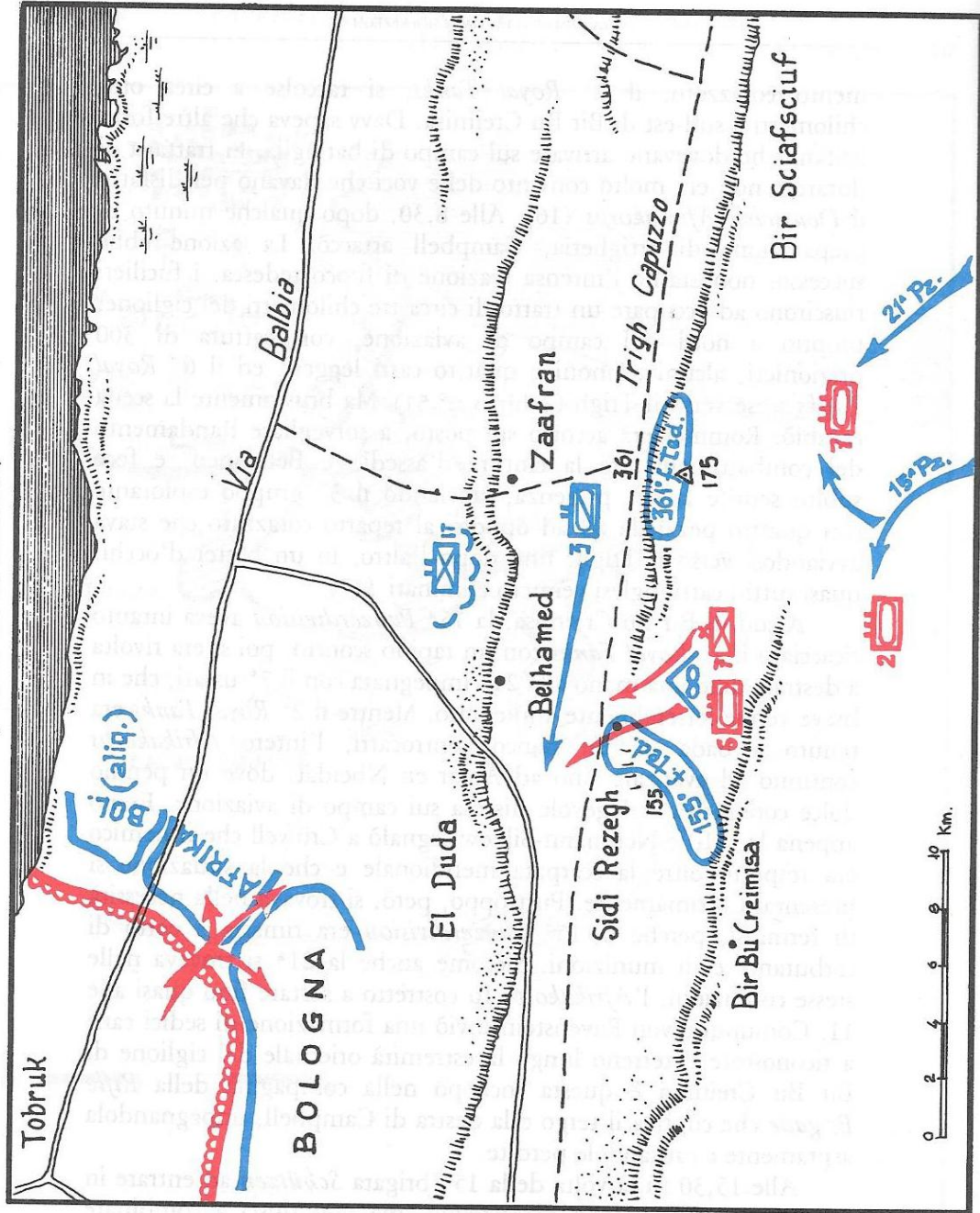
the 2nd *Royal Tanks*, gathered approximately eight kilometers southeast of Bir Bu Creimisa. Davy knew that other British forces were to arrive on the battlefield. It was last and wasn't very convinced that gave voices to undone the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* ⁽¹⁶⁾. At 08:30, after few minutes artillery preparation, Campbell attacked. The action was successful: despite the intense reaction of the German fire, riflemen were able to occupy a stretch of about three kilometers of the Ridge, just north of the airfield, with 300 prisoners, capturing several cannon and four light tanks, and the 6th *Royal Tanks* descended towards the Trigh (sketch No. 51). But suddenly the scene changed. Rommel had come on the spot to supervise the progress of the fighting between the siege belt and the Belhamed, and made his presence felt immediately, launching the 3rd Recon Group with four pieces of 88 to oppose the armored Division which was starting toward the Trigh: one after another, in the blink of an eye, almost all British tanks were eliminated ⁽¹⁷⁾.

South of Bir Bu Creimisa, the 15th *Panzerdivzsion* had meanwhile pressed back the 2nd *Royal Tanks* with a quick fight, then he was right to give a hand to the 21st engaged with 7th Hussars, that summary was literally annihilated. While the 2nd *Royal Tanks* was kept at bay by his side, the *Afrikakorps* anti-tank continued to advance until Abiar en Nbeidat, where a gentle slope allowed an easy descent to the airfield. They were just at 09:10 and Neumann-Silkow signaled to Crüwell that the enemy was repelled beyond the southern escarpment and the situation looked very well. Unfortunately, however, was the need to stop, because the 15th *Panzerdivzsion* was short of fuel and ammunition. Since even the 21st was under the same conditions, the *Afrikakorps* was forced to stay until nearly at 11:00. However von Ravenstein send a formation of sixteen tanks to recon the terrain along the eastern end of the ridge of Bir Bu Creimisa and this fell into the company of *Rifle Brigade* covering the rear and right of Campbell, sharply cutting and causing her to suffer losses.

At 15:30, it was the turn of the 15th *Schützen Brigade* to take action against the group for support, but was unable to combine very much less to clean up the Sidi Rezegh Ridge. Really in that moment Rommel — who feared the developments of the sortie from Tobruk-incited Crüwell pointing towards the axis road to give support to the isolated 155th infantry, warning him of the likelihood

I COMBATTIMENTI NELLA ZONA DI GABR-SALEH
(mattino del 21 novembre)

Schizzo n. 51



an offensive attempt by fresh armored units from the South (the 2nd *Royal Tanks*). Neumann-Silkow was able to push his 15th *Panzer* until one kilometer from Campbell's Command, but nothing more. On the other hand the 8th *Panzerregiment*, posted with some pieces of 88 the 2nd *Royal Tanks*, drove this mess and with a dozen tanks out of action. An afternoon spent in a series of minor clashes and confused and momentary stops for refuelling, waiting-for Davy-reinforcements ⁽¹⁸⁾ and fear-for Crüwell-to be blindsided. At dusk, Davy was left with 19 efficient tanks: six of the 2nd *Royal Tanks*, one of 6th, three of the brigade command and nine of the isolated 7th *Hussars*. Campbell was very worn down.

Gatehouse and Scott-Cockburn was in the sensitive and unannounced late. Uncoupling of the *Afrikakorps* had been favored by the need to supply: the 4th armored due to the lack of autonomy of the *Stuart* and the 22nd because it has been too detached from their Corps, services the night before had not been able to fill. Apart from that, notwithstanding the Gott stresses to proceed at full speed, neither unit was able to bear the slightest relief to hard-working troops at Sidi Rezegh. Both spent too much time for supplies, then inexplicably took hours to overcome the desert tract that in the morning the *Afrikakorps* had covered in just over one hour. The 22nd Brigade was certainly able to speak in favor of the 2nd *Royal Tanks* with its 90 *Crusader* ⁽¹⁹⁾, but was right direction, turned to empty-you don't know what orders he received-had a brief clash with the 15th *Panzerdivision* and, in essence, remained offstage. The 4th Brigade, then, was not even able to overcome the rearguards of *Afrikakorps*. If these brigades are arrested at fifteen kilometers from the airport, from the 1st South African Brigade at 09:30 Armstrong was stopped even farther by Gott, who had no intention of throwing into a armored melee an infantry units still inexperienced.

Also on the side of Tobruk, the offensive had stalled after the conquest of conventionally called *Tiger* focus. In the afternoon, the salient created in the sector of the *Bologna* was 3,500 meters deep and equally wide the prisoners amounted to a thousand, of which half Germans.

Gloria had indicated that three strong points were gone, the 205th artillery and a group of the 16th artillery grouping annihilated,

the Carmuset Beludeah zone under enemy threat. It was prepared in haste a fillet rather than a real back line, passing through Carmuset Beludeah. The moment was difficult, so much so that he decided to suspend Navarini departure of the II/39th infantry for Gambut, representing *Panzergruppe* the absolute's need not weaken further the new deployment of the *Bologna*. But it came a stasis. When Watts learned that he could not receive any concrete help by 7th Armored Division by South Africans gave up to go and thought to entrench in place to withstand the Italian-German counterattacks. In agreeing on the suspension of the action, the more not Norrie resume at least until the next day, now 13:00 that the 30th Corp hoped to have insured by ed-Duda. At this point it is worth to bring back the picture described by the official British narration:

"The situation was now so extraordinary that a brief mention will not be out of place, to lighten the events. On approximately one hundred miles of terrain, from the edge of the Tobruk sortie to the desert Southwest of Sidi Rezegh airfield, the forces of two opposing sides had even superimposed as layers of Neapolitan ice cream. In turn, starting from the North, there were: a) the 70th Division's troops out of the perimeter held by b) German and Italian troops with face turned to the North and West, c) a layer of axis troops with South facing d) portion of the 7th support group North of Sidi Rezegh airfield, while the rest of the 7th support group and 7th Armored Brigade, opposite South, opposed to e) the bulk of DAK headed northbound, chased by f) the 4th and 22nd Armored Brigade. To complete the landscape there were units of the 361st *Afrika* Regiment on hill 175, East of Sidi Rezegh airfield, and the entire 155th Regiment to the West. As you can see, a very complicated situation that, if recommended as supposed in a tutorial with executives, would be rejected because in reality these things absolutely cannot happen" ⁽²⁰⁾.

Instead at the border the events had taken place without many problems. Auchinleck wrote: "*On 21 November, thinking like all enemy armored forces were or had been put off because of ours, on Gen. Cunningham gave the order to 13th Corp starting to [his] maneuver, and I agree with this decision*" ⁽²¹⁾. In fact, there was a sequence of "interpretations", let's say of convenience, which had resulted in a unrealistic conviction: the intense movement westward by the aircraft, at 19:00 the strange occurrence of fighting soon interrupted by the Germans, the recent abandonment of the battlefield to Gabr Saleh, persuasion by Norrie-always of that

morning – that the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* repositions to the Northwest after “got a woody.” No wonder, then, that the telegram that night the war correspondent of the South African Press Association sent from Cairo: “*is authoritatively stated that the battle of Libya, who was at the peak this afternoon, it's going extremely well. The ratio of losses between the axis tanks and British ones was declared equal to 3 to 1. Gen. Rommel, the German commander, is trying to open a gate, but his position is becoming more and more critical*”⁽²²⁾. However, with the passing of hours Cunningham was having by some doubt and, at 17:00, when he learned that Norrie had postponed the junction with Scobie the next day, both the burden on brigades is the lack of inflow of the 5th South African Brigade, expressed a certain discontentment at the liaison officer of 30 Corps: considered essential to the successful completion of the sortie and the achievement of ed-Duda “*would involve simply a short night walk*”. Having regard to the convenience of leaving the 1st South African Brigade in front of Bir el Gobi, was willing to give it a New Zealand Brigade (alluding to that, the 6th, which was heading West to Sidi Azeiz). However, he added in quick-and-dirty tone, if the matter of Tobruk had not been resolved he “*would certainly have wanted to see the Commander of the Corps the following day.*” Then phoned Gen. Harding, Chief of staff of 13th Corps, saying that could point towards the North at their discretion, without the need to refer frequently to the Corps command, except necessity, but also without unnecessary risks. For the co-operation of the New Zealand Brigade at 30th Corp reserves to give orders later.

Norrie believed that the Brigade offered were to come from Gabr Saleh, therefore refused the reinforcement, considering sufficient 5th South Africa, now already at el Haiad-Hagfet. But Cunningham, not persuaded, ordered too that the 6th New Zealand will start along the Trigh Capuzzo westward. In the evening came under the command of 8th Army more comforting. Around 20:00 a report disclosed that that day had been put out of action 170 *Panzer*, the Germans were retreating and the 7th Armored Division that was trying to cut their way. At 23:45 another report giving sixty *Panzer* surrounded by the 7th Armored Division to the South-East of Sidi Rezegh, while the support group is maintained on the Ridge North of the Airport⁽²³⁾.

Even Crüwell, who believed the enemy far superior forces and feared to get in a bind heading towards Belhamed, was thoughtful. The sortie of the British 70th Division had been blocked, but not without punishment and the spearhead of Davy, nor promoted the 6th *Royal Tanks* had been destroyed ⁽²⁴⁾ especially thanks to Rommel's staff who had had all the minor units of the *Afrika* Division. In essence, breaking the encirclement of the fort was to be put in the account of the possibilities and to react appropriately to regain freedom of maneuver. Fight their way North, through the support group deployed at Sidi Rezegh Ridge, didn't look very easy, to the West and South there were armored formations that ignored the residual and consistency which could be easily reinforced. Neumann-Silkow suggested to reunite the two *Panzerregiment* and vibrate a vigorous brushed, but Crüwell was unwilling to play blindly only valid card of Rommel, and probably was worried about supplies, whose problem was made more than once unexpectedly in those two days. Eventually decided to bring the entire *Afrikakorps* overnight to the Gambut area, to the East. He had just arrived with his tactical Command at Bir el-Giaser, when he received (at 22:40) a message sent by Rommel — who was not aware of Crüwell decisions-more than one hour before:

“On November 22, the DAK with the *Pavia* Division will keep the area reached today until Belhamed ⁽²⁵⁾. The Corps will prevent enemy armored forces in front to open up a gap to Tobruk. II/55th infantry regiment and 361st *Afrika* infantry will be at your orders, the tanks will be kept in power for local counterattacks. He commanded the army's tactical is moving to el-Adem" ⁽²⁶⁾.

Crüwell dispose immediately that the 15th *Panzerdivision* focus on hill 196, 10 km South from Gambut, and 21st at Belhamed, taking under control the two infantry regiments of the *Afrika* Division. The two armored divisions will be channeled into full darkness along the Wadi respectively esc-Sciomar and Wadi immediately west of hill 175.

On 22 NOVEMBER.

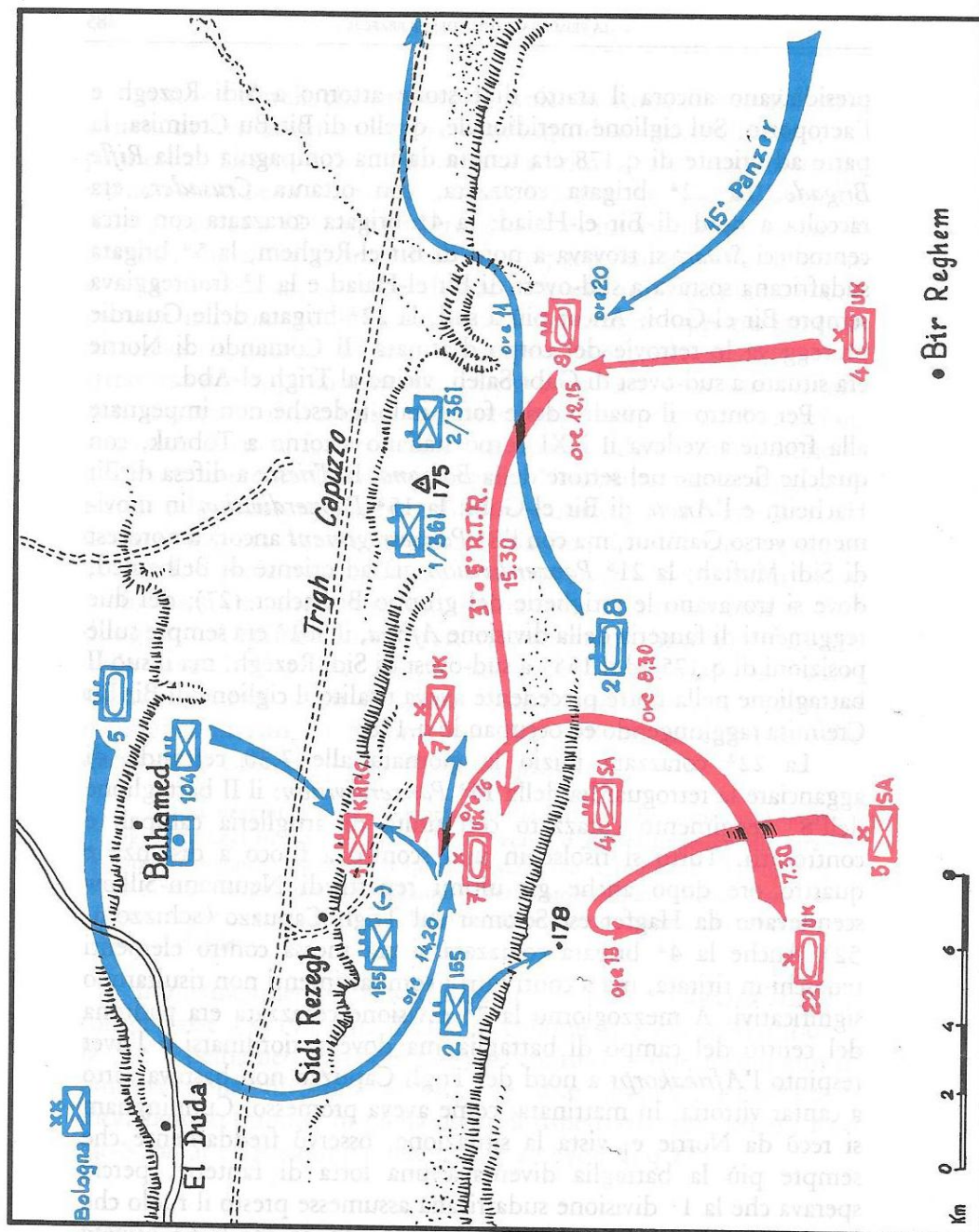
At dawn on the 22nd the British 30th Corps could be summarized as follows. The support group and how much was left of the 7th Armored Brigade (about 30 *cruisers*)

still manning the ridge around Sidi Rezegh and the airport. On the southern edge to Bir Bu Creimisa, eastern part of hill 178 was held by a company of the *Rifle Brigade*. The 22nd Armored Brigade, with eighty *Crusader*, was collected just north of Bir el Haiad; the 4th Armored Brigade with about 110 *Stuart* was located north of Bir el-Reghem; the 1st South African Brigade stopped southwest of Bir el Haiad-and the 1st always faced - Bir el Gobi. Even further South, the 22nd *Guards* Brigade protected the backline of the Corps. Norrie's command was located southwest of Gabr Saleh, near Trigh el-Abd.

By contrast, the German-Italian forces not engaged at the border saw the Italian XXI Corps around Tobruk, with some decrease in the area of *Bologna*; the *Trieste* in defense of Bir Hakeim and the *Ariete* of Bir el Gobi; the 15th *Panzerdivzsion* moving towards Gambut, but with the 8th *Panzerregiment* still northeast of Sidi Muftah; the 21st *Panzerdivision* already East of Belhamed, where they were the artillery of the Boettcher Group ⁽²⁷⁾; of the two infantry regiments of the *Afrika* Division, the 361st was always on the positions of hill 175 and 155th southwest of Sidi Rezegh, but his II battalion in the previous night had moved up the ridge to Bir Bu Creimisa reaching and occupying hill 178.

The 22nd Armored began the day at 07:30 trying to hook the rear of the 15th *Panzerdivision*: the II Battalion 8th Panzer Regiment with field artillery units and anti-tank. It all ended in a firefight and four hours after the latest Neumann-Silkow units descended from esc-Sciomar Hagfet on the Trigh Capuzzo (sketch No. 52). The 4th armored brigade had moved against the retreating German elements, but on balance the fighting were not significant. At noon the 7th Armored Division was mistress of the middle of the battlefield, but had to settle out and having rejected the *Afrikakorps* to the North of the Trigh Capuzzo wasn't enough certain to sing victory. In the morning as promised, Cunningham went by Norrie and, given the situation, coldly remarked that increasingly the battle became an infantry struggle, therefore, hoped that the 1st South African Division took over the role that had been set aside in the plan. Told that the 6th New Zealand Brigade was coming from the East along the Trigh Capuzzo. Norrie's orders were consequential damages: the 22nd Guards had to replace the 1st South African Brigade in front of Bir el Gobi and the entire South African Division at Sidi Rezegh flow.

The fights of the 22 November at Sidi Rezegh



The reunion of the tanks of Gott, it did not of course escape the Germans and Crüwell to the 13:00 initiative, decided to make the 15th *Panzerdivision* a wide turning movement eastward for then throw it against the right flank of the enemy. It wasn't always easy, as it may seem, get a quick execution of orders by armored units and when the 15th *Panzer* took hill 196, Southeast of Bir Sciafsciuf, was forced to stop to refuel. When it was ready (15:30) was little more than an hour and a half at sunset. The 21st *Panzer* Crüwell had ordered to take a defensive attitude, based on the orders of Rommel, and von Ravenstein commissioned the Knabe Group ⁽²⁸⁾ to settle around Belhamed positions. But at noon, Rommel suddenly appeared in person, which arranged the Division's takeover of the coast at Sidi Rezegh: Knabe would attack frontally and the 5th armored Regiment of Stephan, turning North of Belhamed and slipping in the wake of the axis Road, would surpass the Trigh Capuzzo to el-Amar Abiar and attacked the airfield from the West. Rommel and Crüwell had acted independently of the other one (and without even contact the) but if the movement had arranged with convenient coordination, the 7th Armored Division would be crushed between the two *Panzerdivisionen*.

Gen. Armstrong had been warned by Gott to be ready to leave the parking area at 09:30, however, contrary to predictions, the morning had been troubled by rather confused clashes between tanks. Course-clear or not clear it was the situation-it was not possible that the 1st South African Brigade continued to remain strong, especially after the visit of Cunningham in command of the 30 Corps, so at 10:30 it headed northwards. At 13:30 the head of the column came to a couple of kilometers from hill 178, the position of Bir Bu Creimisa Ridge occupied by a few hours of II/155th German infantry, and stopped: Gott had decided to defer to ed-Duda and of giving priority to conquest around the edge to create a reassuring tactical domain on the airport. Dangerous symptoms were manifested by a German initiative and Gott did not want to take any chances. Placed Gatehouse and Scott-Cockburn in alarm condition, around 14:00 summoned his Chief subordinates (but not Armstrong, whose battalions were ready before hill 178) and outlined the plan for the next day: the 1st South African Brigade and the

support group would have captured the Sidi Rezegh Ridge on either side of the positions held by the I *King's Royal Rifle Corps*, broadening the support for the attack on ed Duda; the brigades would have rejected any offense by German tanks and eased the control of ed-Duda. In essence, when the 5th *Panzerregiment* circumvented Abiar el-Amar with 70 tanks, there was from the British generic guidance to counter the opponent but nothing more. At 14.20 a raid manifested in complete surprise and all its evidence. From the West the 5th Armored Regiment proceeded with the 2nd Battalion in the first Echelon and the second, followed by anti-tank pieces; from the North the 104th infantry, left the base, dealt the Sidi Rezegh Ridge. The fight occurred just fierce in narrow strip flat. Part of the infantry of the support group was overwhelmed even before the deployment of British batteries could oppose the first tenacious resistance. Then the 7th Armored Brigade intervened and, especially, the 22nd just arrived at the airport with its eighty *Crusader*. The mass of tanks by Gott was sufficient for driving the 21st *Panzerdivision*, but, after a early failed attempt, followed efforts without coordination and counterassault of small groups of tanks had nothing against German anti-tank deployments. After an hour and a half of bitter fighting, the 5th *Panzerregiment* prevailed sweeping all before, especially if the tanks and consolidating the occupation landing strip with the II battalion placed opposite to the Southeast and the Northeast and East. The battalion of the *King's Royal Rifle Corps*, between the pressure of the German infantry to the North and 115th *Panzer* fire South and now short of ammunition, gave up ground, too.

While the units of the 7th Armored Division continued to fight desperately in the area of Sidi Rezegh, the 4th Armored Brigade of Gatehouse from the vicinity of Abiar en-Neibat saw the smoke and dust caused by fighting, could hear the intense fire but was unable to form a clear idea of what was happening. Soon came the call of Gott and the Brigade, left in place the 8th Hussars, came slowly with the 3rd and 5th *Royal Tanks*. Three kilometers from the airport where Gen. Davy went to meet Gatehouse and put it to the irrepressible enemy pressure. Gott, also on the spot, ordered him to launch a counter-attack on the right flank of the compact 21st *Panzerdivision*. But events took place quickly and rather than a counterattack should perhaps

talk about a desperate effort to save the support group. The 4th Armored Brigade was therefore in the immense fuss of the battle field almost blindly. The intense fire of field artillery and anti-tank that received increased disorientation and almost immediately the two regiments found themselves mixed in bulk. However the action-spurred by the example, by the energy and the courage of the support group Commander, Gen. Campbell began. Unfortunately the leading squadrons fell under the shot, it seems, of the 22nd Armored Brigade and this led to confusion, and the commanders of two regiments, consulted, decided to move out of the chaos to reorder and Gatehouse units approved. In such circumstances, Campbell was forced to order the abandonment of the airport. It wasn't easy to release and the 4th Armored Brigade, which basically had lost only eight *Stuart*, just throw back into order he plunged back into the fray. The 5th *Royal Tanks* headed on the right, across the landing strip, and ended in the midst of *Panzer* and anti-tank guns; the 3rd was not very successful. He was in full disarray that the two regiments in the collection flow again: one, the 5th, with twenty-six tanks, each other even with only 5⁽²⁹⁾.

At dusk, both sides stopped⁽³⁰⁾. The 5th *Panzerregiment* was short of ammunition and felt the lack of a strong artillery support and what was perceived by Gott: it was time to drive the Germans from the airfield and Sidi Rezegh Ridge. But even if theoretically the 4th Armored Brigade had almost a hundred *Stuart*⁽³¹⁾, the 22nd was left with 34 *Crusader* and the 7th with a dozen *cruisers*. In addition, a countermove to the West had to pass under the fire of the pieces that the opponent had placed on the positions of Sidi Rezegh and hill 178 and face sides guns of 50 and of German 88. So Gott decided to abandon the field and to gather the forces at the height of the 5th South African Brigade.

This was less than two kilometers from hill 178⁽³²⁾. Formed an idea of the enemy, Armstrong decided to push in front of the *Transvaal Scottish* battalion with a battery of eight 25 pounds guns and a section of 2 pounders. The 1st *Irish* Battalion was supposed to keep left and the II *Botha* in the second Echelon. Indeed, Armstrong was rather uncertain, as they did not know how things went in the plain of Sidi Rezegh, nor whether and what help could receive from the 7th Armored Division. He had been sent an officer from the *Rifle*

Brigade and he, when he saw the arrival of the South Africans, the nose wrinkle noting the extremely dangerous concentration of vehicles. There was also a few days 4th South African armored cars, under the orders of use of Gott, but were not taken up contacts and this was a sin. At 14:00 *Transvaal Scotttsh* left the base and advanced decided. It wasn't intended to be successful. Before a *Stuka* sowed dead and wounded to the Brigade transport, then about 400 meters raged around the focus of accompanying German weapons. In part because of the accuracy of the shot, and much to the target from long lines of cascading as riflemen in World War I, the action soon disintegrated ⁽³³⁾. The South Africans were smashed on the sand under the enemy offence and there remained. As far as the battery of 25 pounds to do his best and the armored cars would attempt to improve the situation, Armstrong was forced to decide the withdraw, run only at dusk, around 16:30.

When the bulk of the 7th Armored Division withdrew from the airport, the 1st South African Brigade were taking refuge at best to over one kilometer from hill 178. The support group dispose on his right, extending, and the 4th and 22nd Armored Brigade took to the flanks of the deployment. The setback was severe, but lacked the final brushstroke (and no one imagined the disaster the following day). The command of the 4th Armored Brigade was still in Hareifat en-Nbeidat with the 8th Hussars in reserve. The II Battalion of the *Scots Guards*, only infantry unit of the Brigade, was 30 kilometers further South with echelon B.

To the East, at hill 196, in the early afternoon had collected and supplied the 15th *Panzerdivision*. Crüwell and Bayerlein left the command of the *Afrikakorps* in Bir el Chleta and came-from Neumann-Silkow: it was back to Sidi Rezegh, passing South of the Trigh Capuzzo and wanted to follow the maneuver. The Division began moving at 15:30. At it head was the 8th Armored Regiment, followed the 15th rifle brigade with the II/33rd artillery, on the left side, moving the 33rd *Panzerjäger* Group exposed flank protection. Before you even reach the height of Bir el-Haleizin were sighted two enemy masses: a South of Sidi Muftah and the other heading Northwest. The first, which turned out to be a supply column, escorted by armored vehicles and light tanks, was immediately put into southbound West with heavy losses; the other, when he saw the approaching danger, drove away in a hurry. Were at 17:00 at Sidi Rezegh and they fought again. Crüwell said

then Neumann-Silkow rushing to the cannon. Never imagined that after just few kilometers would be sealed on the command of the 4th Armored Brigade and the 1st Hussars, both 8 miles away from thinking about a threat from the South and so imminent⁽³⁴⁾. There was history: taken prisoner the deputy commander of the Brigade⁽³⁵⁾, 17 officers and 150 troops. They were captured a command tank, 35 *Stuart*, some armored cars, guns and various media. At 21:00 the 15th Panzer made contact with the 361st infantry, always on the positions of hill 175 and 155th infantry to the West. In his further journey towards Sidi Rezegh the Division had encountered the remnants of the Brigade, which traced back Gatehouse ignoring the fate of the 8th Hussars. Due to the darkness, the clash was very short and the minimal losses, but this was enough to complete disorganization of the unit. What had been the strong point of 30th Corp was out of the game as a fighter and he would remain throughout the next day.

Norrie was not satisfied with either the use of armored units, nor lack of infantry support he knew going to turnout: the 6th New Zealand Brigade and the 1st South African Brigade. The 6th New Zealand with Gen. H.E. Barrowclough⁽³⁶⁾ had received timely provisions, since the starting order had arrived at 10:30. The need, however, to await the arrival of a squadron of *Valentine* of the 8th *Royal Tanks* assigned in reinforcement, made 14:00 before it could join the Trigh Capuzzo. Having no guidance on what might meet, Barrowclough began a cautious advance with the overhead, in formation explained, and anti-tank pieces on the sides. At 16:15, however, came the order to increase the speed because the support group was surrounded at Sidi Rezegh: *"You do not receive other orders, but enter in combat and make contact with Gen. Gott, Commander of the 7th Armored Division, which is there surrounded (...). You have to decide immediately whether to move along the road or on the escarpment"*⁽³⁷⁾. Accordingly Barrowclough continued driving even after sunset and only at 20:15 decided to stop at Gasr el Arid-to rest and replenish the troops six or seven hours. Had covered about twenty kilometers in more than six hours.

The other unit was started towards Sidi Rezegh, the 1st South African Brigade, had postponed a day after their arrival on the battlefield. From 13:15 Norrie had phoned Brink to tell him that the 22nd *Guards* Brigade was on the way to

replace the 1st and that, therefore, this would leave in place only a few items of coverage until the onset of the Guards. As the Commander of the Corps had stressed the urgency of the measure in the light of operational commitment planned for dawn on the 23rd, Brink suffered more than a puzzlement: the night before the 11th Hussars patrols had reported (or rather confirmed) the presence of a 60 M 13 tanks at Bir el Gobi-and that morning the Italian artillery fire was intense. Therefore feared that a retrograde movement of battalions, to take in the area of cargo on vehicles, exposing them to a sudden episode of *Ariete* with disastrous consequences. However, While not believing the Brigade-totally settled into trench warfare and pitches on a rather broad-front could disengage within three hours, immediately (13:30 hours) ordered Pienaar to prepare to move, leaving a battalion reinforced by armored car company. Pienaar, meanwhile, reiterated the concept that "*in light of information about the enemy's attitude in the area of intervention [?], it would have been very dangerous and inappropriate for a motorized infantry column moving during the night hours (...)*", and asked permission to release immediately, but starting at first light of the 23rd. Brink, in turn under the command of 30th Corp, supported the request, totally necessary over time to remove units and artillery from underground locations and disengage. Faced with such communication, Norrie, probably very annoyed, granted permission but kept to emphasize once again the importance and the urgency of the measure. So the 1st South African Brigade, calmly and without any disorder, left the positions and backed out of about ten kilometers to the East. In the evening came another setback. While at first it was planned that the tactical group left from Pienaar ahead of Bir el Gobi was soon replaced by the Guards, it was pointed out that for the 8th Army Command-who feared not enough guards to control the *Ariete*, given the new situation – the tactical group in question had to remain temporarily in place reinforcement to the Guards. As soon as possible, though, you would be attached to the Brigade.

About the situation at Sidi Rezegh, Norrie at 23:30 bother to call personally to the command of the 1st South African Division:

"The enemy attacked in late evening. He captured the Airport South of Sidi Rezegh and rejected by the escarpment. Armstrong has counterattacked by Brigade. Our current positions are just south of the ridge. The enemy has about 100 tanks in the area south of Sidi Rezegh. Your job for tomorrow: occupy the positions now held by the 7th Armored Division.

The 1st South African Brigade will go at your orders as soon as you arrive. Make contact with the 7th Armored Division tomorrow at the earliest and will give you the exact situation. I'm about to order the 7th Armored Division to cover both your flanks. And essential question that establish connection with the 7th Armored Division as soon as possible tomorrow morning. These orders will be confirmed in writing that night. I would add that the action of the 13th Corps is progressing very well and we can expect a considerable aid from the East" ⁽³⁸⁾.

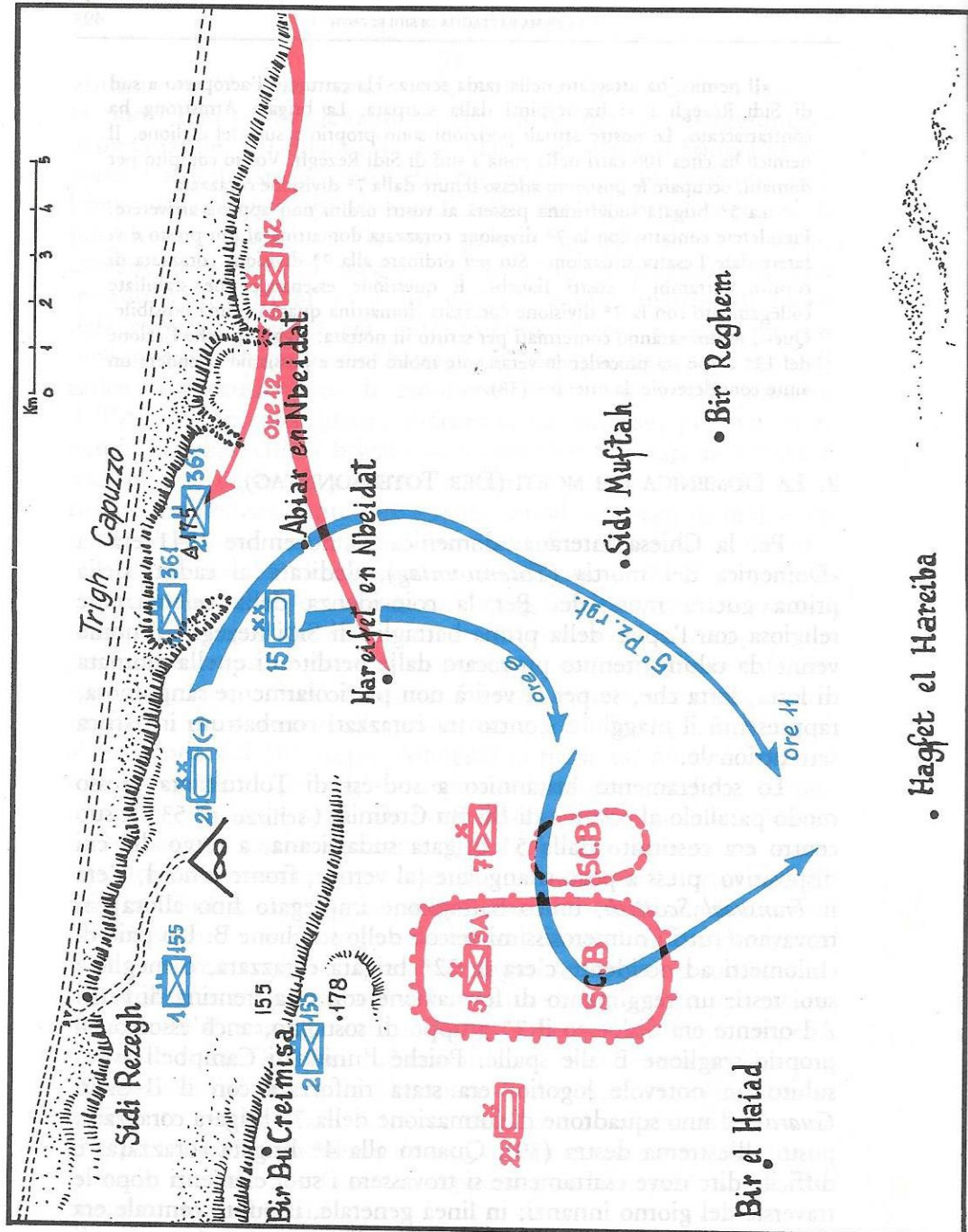
2. THE DAY OF THE DEAD (DER TOTENSONNTAG).

For the Lutheran Church, Sunday November 23, 1941 was the "Sunday of the Dead" (*Totensonntag*), dedicated to the fallen of the first world war. For the coincidence of religious celebration with the apex of the first battle of Sidi Rezegh, the name came from some felt caused by loss of one day's fighting, wrestling, if indeed not particularly bloody, represented the largest armored clash fought in North Africa.

The British deployment to the South-East of Tobruk was roughly parallel to the ridge of Bir Bu Creimisa (sketch No. 53). Its center was composed of the 1st South African Brigade, on the back of that device, near to the little triangle (at the top, facing north, there was the *Transvaal Scotttsh*, the only battalion used until then), they were all the numerous vehicles of echelon B. A couple of kilometers to the West there was the 22nd Armored Brigade, or rather its remains: a training Regiment with thirty tanks. To the East was located the 7th support group, also with echelon B behind. Since the unit of Campbell had suffered significant attrition, was reinforced by the II *Scott Guards* and one training squadron of the 7th Armored Brigade, the rightmost place ⁽³⁹⁾. As for the 4th Armored Brigade, it's hard to say where exactly they were his elements after the troubles of the day before; generally speaking, the focus was in the area north of Hagfet el-Hareiba. It was, in essence, a device compact enough, but with little defensive meaning: it is clear that Norrie on one side did not intend to give up

I COMBATTIMENTI DELLA DOMENICA DEI MORTI
(mattino del 23 novembre)

Schizzo n. 53



to take over the positions of hill 178 with the South Africans of Armstrong to improve the situation, and the other wanted a little time to reorder the armored units. It is not as clear as intended use in a harmonic framework for the 6th New Zealand Brigade isolated from Sidi Azeiz.

During the night the *Afrikakorps* had perfected its buoyancy. The 21st *Panzerdivision* had collected on the conquered airport, with the Knabe Group on the ridge of Sidi Rezegh. The 15th *Panzerdivision* had stopped in the area of Abiar en-Nbeidat, between two points of support of the wing: hill 175, always held by 361st infantry, and hill 178, manned by the II/155th infantry. The XXI Italian Corps continued the blockade of Tobruk, Southeast of the *Bologna* which had consolidated the investment positions are lagging behind. The Maneuvering Corps had deployed a recon group, just arrived from *gebel*, North of the *Ariete*. Rommel, who became an increasingly comprehensive framework situation, had estimated with an accuracy far greater than the opposing British losses. On the evening of 22nd estimated that 30 Corps had lost 207 tanks to the works of the *Afrikakorps* and 55 by the *Ariete*, i.e. more than a third of armored forces. As a result, at 22:30 confirmed the verbal address guidelines formulated in the afternoon, after an exchange of views with Gambara:

“(...) 2. The composition and terminology will resolve the battle on 23 November in the area southeast of a concentric attack Tobruk of DAK and part of the Gambara Corp. Gambara will attack with the Corp part of the *Ariete* armored Division at 08:00, from el-Gobi to Gambut.

3. The DAK will attack at 07:00, gravitating to the effort on the left, towards el-Gobi, encircle the enemy and destroy him (...).

4. The 3rd Recon Group will strengthen the hold on the opening to the via Baldia and maintain a reconnaissance Corps on Bardia, advancing in the direction of Campbell. The 33rd Recon Group (...) will carry out a reconnaissance in force towards Sidi Omar-Bir Ghirba (...).

5. The XXI Corps will prevent attempts to sortie from Tobruk. The *Pavia* Division will remain in its current location.

6. The 155th infantry and the 361st *Afrika* will be on current positions such as Reserve Corps (...).⁽⁴⁰⁾

In essence, the *Afrikakorps* would attack from the East and South, while the *Ariete* would be rushed behind the 30th Corp. The maneuver had been sketched as early as 16 hours. and precisely according to it-that an interruption Crüwell in radio broadcasts had deprived of connection with Rommel-at midnight

He had already issued their orders, orders that, among other things, kept abreast of the latest happenings of the previous night. In summary, the whole, or nearly so, the infantry available-104th infantry of the 21st *Panzerdivision*, the Mikl Group (i.e. 155th Infantry, *Afrika* Division) and 361st infantry *Afrika*-had to block any attempt by the enemy to break through towards Sidi Rezegh. In the time 15th *Panzerdivision*, reinforced by 5th *Panzer* Regiment of the 21st, would block the 7th Armored Division and the 1st South Africa joining with the *Ariete*. After that the entire armored force would have time to annihilating the enemy. In order the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* was ready to move at 07:00, Crüwell reserves kick off at 6.45 with any additional supplementary orders. The radio message to Rommel arrived at 04:30. It was very long and Crüwell was unable to wait for the complete reception ⁽⁴¹⁾: the left Bayerlein Bir el Chleta at 05:45, without-imagine that half an hour after his staff would be taken en bloc by New Zealanders of Barrowclough, and arrived at hill 175 at 06:30, where Neumann-Silkow had command of the 15th *Panzerdivision*. The 5th *Panzer* Regiment was late, so at 07:30 the 15th moved with the 8th *Panzer* Regiment in the lead, without waiting any further. Crüwell was the first armored group.

In British field the alarm was given by some the 4th South African armored car, however reporting an hundred tanks, three kilometers south of Abiar en-Nbeidat and their advance Southwest was greeted with skepticism. A few minutes later, the first gun of the Panzer made change opinion. The 8th Armored Regiment, which progressed rapidly on the flat and hard desert ground, escort suddenly an enormous mass of parked vehicles, mixed with guns and armored vehicles, bent to the right initiative and jumped on the B echelon of the support group and the 1st South African Brigade making a killing and causing a messy escape. Only items of a certain size were training squadron of the 7th Armored Brigade, which was about to escort 700 German prisoners at Bir el Reghem er-Gharbi, more than twenty kilometers to the South, and remain there in reserve, and an part of the 3rd *Royal Tanks* that was heading South-East. Seeing the *Panzers* arrive, the *cruisers* made their front. In the most complete chaos once again included the initiative and energy of the brave Gen. Campbell, who's using what happened under his hand sought to contain the avalanche. The reaction to that was disorganized and fragmented, hit both

Neumann-Silkow was Crüwell, but suggested different purposes. The first would abandon initial plans to aim towards Bir el Gobi and preferred to exploit the advantage gained to complete the destruction of the British forces that had stumbled. Crüwell, rather attractive, while acknowledging the continued attack, believed the numerically superior opponent so-it must be remembered that the 5th *Panzerregiment* had not yet arrived – necessitate the contest of *Ariete* and prefer a different and more effective attack from the Southeast. Then ordered to continue the movement towards Bir el Gobi. The 15th *Panzerdivision* disengaged with some difficulty and a sufficient distance, stopped in the area, Northwest of Hagfet el-Hareiba to regroup and refuel. Here, at 11:00, was joined by the 5th *Panzerregiment* and, just over an hour later by the *Ariete*.

The Italian Division had received order, late in the afternoon before, to send a strong, or grouping towards Sidi Muftah to participate in the battle at which the *Afrikakorps* was intended to eliminate the British armored forces. At 08:00 a column ⁽⁴²⁾, under the command of Gen. Di Nisio, Deputy Commander of the Division, left Biro el-Gobi. The movement did not last long. Towards 10:00 the grouping's head went on to run in the fire of the artillery troops hastily set up by the 5th South African Brigade under the orders of Gott, covered the echelon B from offenses from the South. Di Nisio, utterly unaware of the local situation, believed to be facing a substantial enemy, so he stopped and did take a defensive attitude temporarily: the VIII tank battalion facing north and the IX facing Southeast. The stop lasted for a couple of hours, then pushed patrols Northeast met German recon elements and resumed movement, joining the 15th *Panzerdivision*.

Collecting all forces, Crüwell-formulated quickly the maneuver. It was his intention to push opposing forces northward tightening them against static defenses of the 21st *Panzerdivision* and then destroy them. The action would begin at 14:00 with a generally linear formation: the 132nd Tank (80 tanks) to the left, the 8th *Panzer* (120 tanks) at the Center and 5th *Panzer* (40 tanks) to the right. On the reverse, a few hundred meters, the motorized infantry: the V/8th bersaglieri and 15th Rifle Brigade, with 111th Rifle behind the 8th *Panzer* and the 200th Rifle behind the 5th *Panzer*. One had to be at full speed and the infantry

stay on trucks for as long as possible. But we must put across the fact that it was not at all closely coordinated action. What were the reasons for that-and one of them could be the fact that Crüwell was devoid of a Staff in tow-the picture sketched heads is more precisely configured with the identification of two *distinct* sets of forces: the *Ariete* on the left and the 15th *Panzerdivision* right; agents with significant flexibility to address, if not quite autonomously.

From the British, German release had been considered at first with amazement then explained by attributing to the enemy attack on the character of a simple raid without a particular goal. Therefore Norrie set to reshuffle the ranks with relative calm. Surprised that has not been felt Rommel's intention to resolve the issue soon and in a radical way. The fact is that the 7th Armored Division was not yet collected, the 1st South Africa remained divided into two parts and the 6th New Zealand Brigade abandoned to itself.

The 1st South African Division seemed destined not to meet. Gen. Brink, who had witnessed pretty closely to the German invasion of the backline of the 5th Brigade, had arrested Pienaar immediately while waiting for the situation to clarify. The two brigades were both on the defensive. The 5th was unaware of being dangerously exposed. Gott had spent the night in the area and could see the breadth and complexity of the problem, despite not having formed a precise idea about German intentions. Armstrong advised to form a square with anti-aircraft guns on each side and to worry about the directions from the South. Then he employs the II *Scots Guards* and one battery of the 3rd horse artillery anti-tank, tentatively from the support group. In the late morning the Brigade was placed with the battalion 3rd *Transvaal Scotttsh* and a 25 lbs. to the North, on a front of about three kilometers. the I *Irish*, two half batteries of 25 lbs. and of 2 lbs. on the West side, about five kilometers of extension; the 2nd anti-tank section and II *Botha* facing East; the B echelon with a battery and a half from 25 lbs, a section of 18 lbs. and of 2 lbs. to the South. Outside of the quadrangle, the 22nd Armored Brigade with two 25 lbs battery was deployed to the Southwest, while the opposite side had deployed the 4th horse artillery. Northeast followed the 4th South African armored cars and then the 26th New Zealand battalion.

The support group was rearward Southeast, over Bir er-Reghem. It wasn't much: it was the Group's Command and leftovers (caught) here and there by Campbell, but in that area were concentrating the 7th and 4th Armored Brigade, which-according to the Gen. Davy-"*was not completely under control*" ⁽⁴³⁾. Using the break, all provided fuel to be able to intervene to help the South Africans.

Around midday a counter-battery fire from German artillery stationed on Belhamed seemed to Armstrong to prelude to a real threat from the North, but Gott held to renew the advent of danger that could come from the South. At 14:00, before leaving the command of the 5th Brigade, Gott met the Commander of the 4th Armored Car Regiment which informed him that the Germans were forming to the Southeast a line facing north. Gott not manifested surprise and commented: "*your South African Brigade seem to put it down with glue. Will not move, or turn the artillery and isn't entrenched. I'm sorry for it*" ⁽⁴⁴⁾

Meanwhile, Brink was personally presented to the tactical command of 30 Corps to expose their situation. Norrie the repeats the prospect of an even bigger tank battle and urged to hasten the reunion of the entire Division. New objection of Brink: given that a reinforced battalion was left in front of Bir el Gobi-and that he did not have a proper reserve, the 1st Brigade was not sufficiently robust to open up and join the 5th. Norrie cut short and ordered the immediate influx of detachment by Pienaar left to wait for the Guards, but it came pretty much at dusk returned to his command, Brink was watching a reassuring message posted by Armstrong at 13:35: landscape was now clearer, the enemy had been counterattacked and New Zealanders had made contact with his right. Replicating Brink (hours about 15:30) was in line with its communication of 30 Corp just received and resulted in reporting 85 enemy tanks a few kilometers Northwest of Hagfet el-Hareiba and 15 tanks and 300 vehicles just southwest of Bir el Haiad-all for the moment still. A subsequent brief interview with Pienaar was not very encouraging for Brink. According to Pienaar, between the two South Africa brigades there was always the same opposing mass and he was worried for his own right flank. "*At*

15:55 the advanced command of South African Division was broadcasting a message to the Chief of staff of the 1st South African Brigade when the latter Suddenly interrupted communication. "Wait!"-Was the last word of the Brigade) ⁽⁴⁵⁾

The news of the arrival of New Zealanders was auspicious lacking details, it is true, but you could trust, at least, in a strengthened force complex fronting Bir Bu Creimisa and airport. Sidi Rezegh. The 6th New Zealand Brigade, after a stop at Gasr el Arid was allocated-at 3 a.m. in a westerly direction. Barrowclough had decided to bypass Bir el-Chleta he knew was in German hands and then climb the cliff reaching Wadi Sciomar, about three kilometers from hill 175. But in the darkness made the detour too soon, and when they reported on the Trigh Capuzzo noticed be precisely to Bir el-Chleta. The surprise was equal to New Zealanders and Germans. The latter (about 200); about to leave, they realized what was happening when their vehicles began to explode and to go up in flames under enemy grenades, and after a brief and confusing firefight surrendered. The Commander of the 6th New Zealand had then a second and most welcome surprise: he had captured much of the command of the *Afrikakorps*. With a little more luck could have taken even Crüwell! The blow was severe for the Germans, not only ciphers, but also and above all for the loss of the Center broadcasts, so that suffered from the injury for a few weeks.

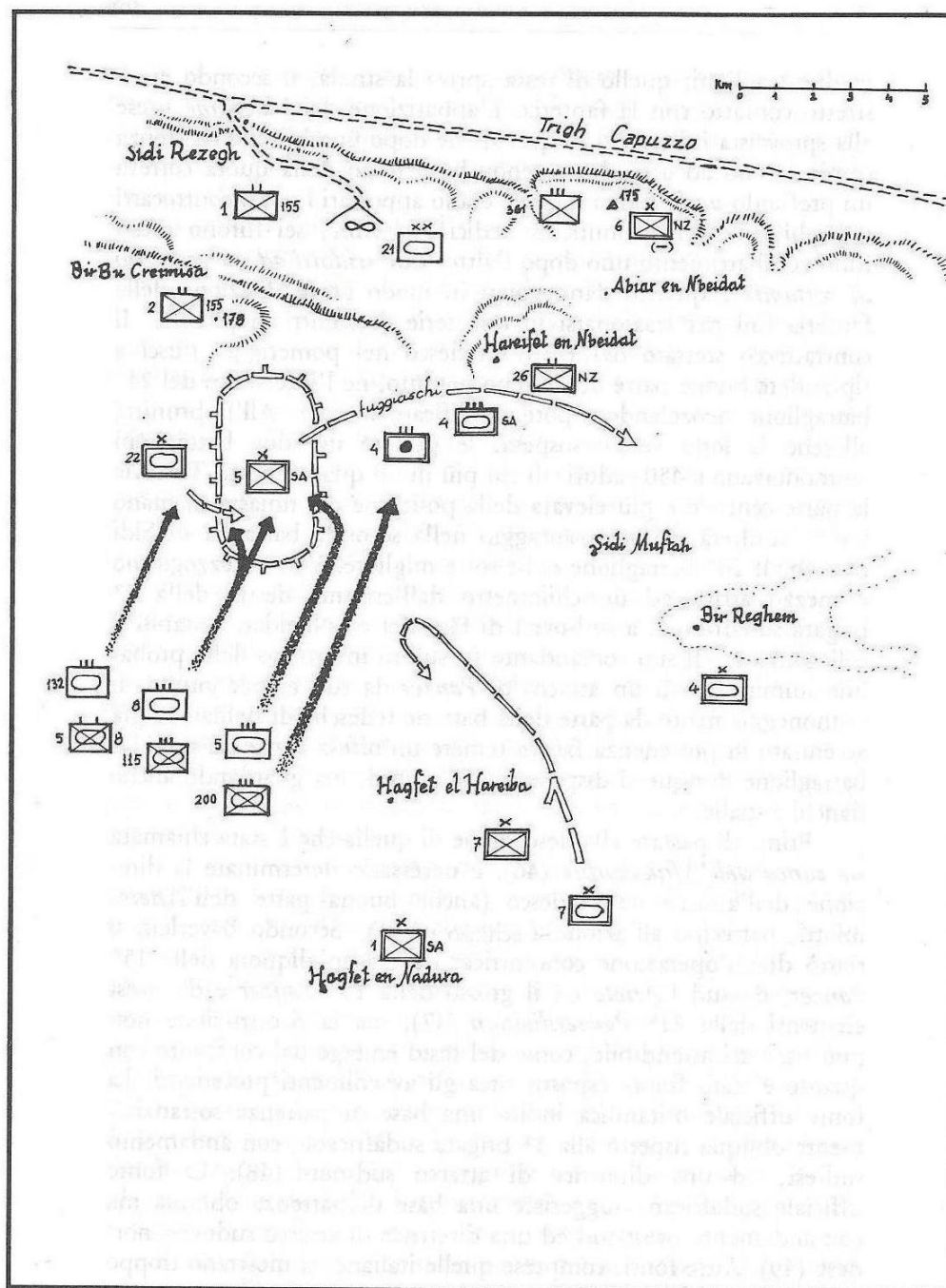
Barrowclough, of course, does not rest on its laurels and understandings, correcting the mistake of direction, climbed the Ridge continuing towards Sidi Rezegh. He had a skirmish with the German 3rd Recon Group but at 10:30 reached the Wadi. Here, shortly after, a liaison officer sent by 30 Corps Command him abreast of local events and the presence of some 50 Italian tanks South of Hagfet el-Hareiba. Barrowclough decided to occupy hill 175 with the 25th battalion, reinforced by the squadron of *Valentine* and supported by 24th, and make contact with the 1st South African Brigade by sending to Hareifet en-Nbeidat the 26th battalion with a 25 lbs. and a section of 2 lbs. Evidently he was made well aware of the situation. Shortly before noon he departed.

The 25th battalion moved with much optimism and indeed initially things seemed to be okay. The tanks proceeded

in two echelons: the head opened the way, the second was in close contact with the infantry. The appearance of *Valentine* took aback the defenders of hill 175, which after an initial resistance began to surrender, however on the back of the dimension ran a deep Wadi, along which were stationed the German anti-tank pieces. In a few minutes, of sixteen *Valentines*, six were put out of action, one after the other, “two “*reduced to a tangle of wreckage*” and four damaged severely. The action of the infantry was split into a series of clashes in platoon. The counterattack launched by the German I/361st in the afternoon managed to regain much of the lost ground, nor the intervention of 24th New Zealand battalion could change things. At dusk, when the fight was stopped, two battalions’ losses amounted to 450 fallen, of which more than a quarter died. However, the Central and highest part of the position had been holding them and will be of great benefit in the second battle of Sidi Rezegh. The 26th Battalion had better luck. Around noon and a half came a kilometer from the far right of the 1st South African Brigade, South-West of Hareifet en-Nbeidat, and established the link. Its commander was immediately informed of the likely imminence of a *Panzer* attack from the South and, furthermore, the cannonade from the German of batteries Belhamed already mentioned earlier was fear an insult by the North. The battalion then dispose facing north, but also looking its flanks and rear.

Before we move on to the description of what has been called “*the charge of the Afrikakorps*”⁽⁴⁶⁾, you must determine the direction of the Italian-German attack (even much of *Ariete*, in fact, participated in the action) (sketch No. 54). According to Bayerlein was concentric operation: from the East an part of the 15th *Panzer*; from the South the *Ariete* and the bulk of the 15th *Panzer* and West elements of the 21st *Panzerdivision*⁽⁴⁷⁾, but the reconstruction cannot be trusted, as emerges from the comparison with what has been said about previous events. The British official source indicates a base obliquely to substantially 1st South African Brigade, with trends in the Southeast, and a Director of South-North connection⁽⁴⁸⁾. The South African official source suggests a base obliquely but with West-South trend and a leader of the Southwest-northeast⁽⁴⁹⁾. Other sources, including Italian ones, are too vague and generic in order to be taken into serious consideration. In

Schizzo n. 54



finally, for the many details included, the sources quoted, the careful identification of the position and of the intervention of individual drives, it considers more convincing the South African study, which therefore is taken based on this examination.

After their meeting, Crüwell forces began to prepare for the great decisive combat. The three armored regiments were placed on a line, starting roughly from Bir el-Haiad, descended toward the Southeast. The deployment was taken under fire of British and South African batteries, calls to curb a threat that now loomed real and imminent. A fire, it is clear that, far from accurate, but when the attack came, development quickly became deadly. Shortly after 15:00, suddenly the axis tanks moved: nearly 250 tanks followed by few hundreds of vehicles of various kinds and artillery tractors. The Centre, i.e. the 8th *Panzerregiment* with its 120 tanks, was the spearhead and proceeded towards the southwest edge of the 5th South African Brigade.

Of course, Crüwell had not deliberately taken a linear formation to move against the square box that had an edge as the first impact. Not being humanly possible to know the location of enemy units-already was difficult knowing one of your! – He wanted to advance to rake, pushing towards the ridge of Bir Bu Creimisa and Sidi Rezegh position everything he encountered and who could be the remnants of the 7th Armored Division and the 1st South African Division. The concept of maneuver was therefore reduced to a simple powerful head-on collision carried out at full speed to crush the opponent against the infantry of the 21st *Panzerdivision*. Perhaps this "*it would seem that no provision of coordination has been imparted about objectives, reference lines, artillery support and links*"⁽⁵⁰⁾. From the German side the fight showed up very difficult now:

“A terrific front fire more than 100 guns concentrated on the two *Panzer* regiments attack and two rifle regiments who followed closely on their vehicles. A mass of unusual anti-tank pieces in this theatre of operations, and cleverly hidden in the midst of enemy vehicles placed out in the morning, inflicted heavy casualties to the two regiments. Particularly annoying was the fire coming from the left side, the sector assigned to the *Ariete* Armored Division, not yet entered the fight (...)”⁽⁵¹⁾.

In reality the enemy pieces of 25 lbs. pointed to the South were, at most, thirty, but the 8th *Panzerregiment* saw almost all of them

near, because the 5th *Panzer* proceeded along a road outside the East flank of the enemy and the Italian 132nd Tank had immediately lost ground not being able to keep to the speed of the Germans. Also, shorten the distances and arrived just a few hundred meters, the 8th *Panzer* had against all the guns of 2 lbs. and machine guns of the southern side of Armstrong. The backlash was undoubtedly very hard especially for the rapid disappearance of several commanders, fell dead or wounded at the head of the unit. So, how to open up a gap 15:30 in front of South African, fire at point-blank range of the defenders and the sudden loss of certain links in the German chain of command made a quick adjustment of the 8th *Panzer* and 115th Rifle behind. At 16:00, put back into order, the 8th *Panzer* broke through defense lines and, while the I battalion continued north, the II bent slightly westward to meet the counter-attack of the 22nd armored brigade.

This should be undertaken by the *Ariete*, but, as we know, M. 13 tanks, armored line left wing, moved with low speed, so as to cause an increasing detachment with the 15th *Panzerdivision*. The consequences of this were two: the left side of the Central complex, although protected by a battery of 88, came to be "by air" and Regiment in formation of the 22nd Armored Brigade was available for a counterattack on the 5th of South Africa. And the intervention took place just as the *Panzer* broke apart the first South African lines. It was a difficult time for the German formation, as it not only loomed the danger of a disconnect between the tanks of 8th *Panzer* and 115th Rifle's companies, but also became the vulnerable "line" of the infantry. After a bitter duel the *Crusader* had to turn towards the Northeast. Meanwhile, came around from the *Ariete* to complete the envelopment.

Right, the 5th *Panzerregiment*, although lead a somewhat autonomous action and certainly less challenging, had setbacks, too. Made a few kilometers, the lead battalion was under the shot of the 4th horse artillery and 60th Field, then had to endure a brief but violent clash with a group of tanks of Campbell or Davy from the Southeast, then bent to the Northwest despite the fire of some Bofors anti-aircraft and broke through the South African Eastern front, getting his break in the echelon B and sowing panic. The disadvantages of

most, however, were the 200th infantry. Initially placed facing South, against the 1st South African Brigade and the support group, had to spend a good twenty minutes to abandon such a lineup and set out to follow the 5th *Panzer*. When he left, therefore, existed a significant separation with the armored group and, as if that were not enough, the shooting of the 4th horse artillery caused a brief heel 15th motorcyclists battalion. Finally, when the 5th *Panzerregiment* bent towards the Northwest, the Regiment, without the protection of tanks, found himself in serious embarrassment against the angry reaction of fire that residues of the 7th Armored Division directed him on every side. The fall of darkness, however, managed to make their way and to participate in the booty.

The irruption of *Panzer* by South African obviously defensive perimeter was decisive: “*The breakthrough in the opponent's knee- 8th Panzer report stated - tanks appeared everywhere, the enemy expected*”⁽⁵²⁾. The *tanks* left fell back fighting, supported by anti-tank pieces and those of field. Armstrong had followed the course of the battle from his command and sent an officer to ask anti-tank guns from the 26th New Zealand battalion, but it was too late: when he learned that the *Panzer* were close, they were already too many. At 16:15 the command fell prisoner. The defense was organized at the end, but for more than two hours isolated resistance continued.

While it was the annihilation of the 1st South African Brigade, the 6th New Zealand Brigade, even if he could not do anything. His was largely committed on hill 175: for he was to preserve at all costs the possession of the fixed goal, but undoubtedly avoided the attention of 21st *Panzerdivision* speaking entirely southward, not to mention that if you had ventured in the wilderness would surely met more serious difficulties. As for the 26th battalion, spent in relative calm early afternoon hours, but all of a sudden began the messy flow of singles and then the South African echelon B vehicle groups who, coming out of the dusty cloud looming on the 5th Brigade, tried to escape to the North-East: crossed New Zealand lines disappeared into the desert. Received the request of Armstrong, the Commander of the battalion took on its western flank, facing South, all cannons available and they opened fire against the 200th

German infantry. At dusk he realized that he would be attacked directly and, in accordance with orders received, decided to retire. At midnight he was rejoined with the rest of the Brigade, at the Wadi esc-Sciomar.

The command of the 7th Armored Division was at Bir Berraneb, exactly twenty-five kilometers east of Bir el Gobi. During the night were to focus slowly between Bir Berraneb and Hagfet. El-Hareiba the remains of broken units, in a messy drips men, vehicles, tanks, cannons, armored cars and vehicles of all kinds. Little was known of the facts and results; the only impression alive before the eyes of all was that of the disaster. Gen. Gott, who after leaving Armstrong had remained for some time outside the South African defense perimeter with the command car and two *Crusader*, had crossed the battlefield, the capture and grenades, and reaching his command with doubts on the residual strength of the Division. More or less, the 5th South African Brigade had disappeared as a combat unit the 1st, was still available, the 7th Armored Division was not usable so soon. This had reduced the British 30 corps.

The reality, however, was not as bad as it seemed at the time. Whatever Armstrong's Brigade, who had 224 dead, 379 injured and 2,800 prisoners, Gott's losses were relatively light. But more than this situation-that in the darkness of night of the 24th was still to ascertain-an element was to count for the 8th Army: German losses. The *Afrikakorps* had left the field for offense or foe mechanical failures, 72 *Panzer* of 162 with whom he started the "charge" in the afternoon. And 90 still available *Panzer* were what remained of the 250 available on 19 November. And there was another key painful: the disappearance of many unit commanders. The 8th *Panzerregiment* had lost the two battalion commanders and five out of six company commanders; the 115th Rifle, Regimental Commander and two battalion commanders; ignore the specific losses of the 5th *Panzer* and 200th infantry, which is definitely inferior. It was a Pyrrhic victory? According to Liddell Han "*the onerous cost of this tactical success was, under the strategic profile, more damaging to the enemy than any other [Event]*" ⁽⁵³⁾. In the light of subsequent events may agree on the assertion, though it seems questionable as an alternative had Crüwell and, especially, if the judgment would

remained unchanged if Rommel had not immediately decided the race on the frontier against the British rear.

Around midnight the Comando Superiore A.S. reported the events of the day to the Comando Supremo. What had happened in the area south of Bir Bu Creimisa was summarized as follows: "(...) *Maneuver wheeled round according to plan before indicated that participates as well and that Ariete detachment also the CAM Grouping is not yet completed. Italian wing & German wing gathered at 12:30 hours at Dahar er-Reghem & have thus closed the enemy armored masses in a circle that shrinks hour by hour (...)*"⁽⁵⁴⁾. Operations Office tried to set down on paper the situation. It wasn't easy because too little informed; in fact the one sketched out did not respond to reality (sketch No. 55).

3. THE COMMAND ACTION AND PERSONALITIES OF THE COMMANDERS.

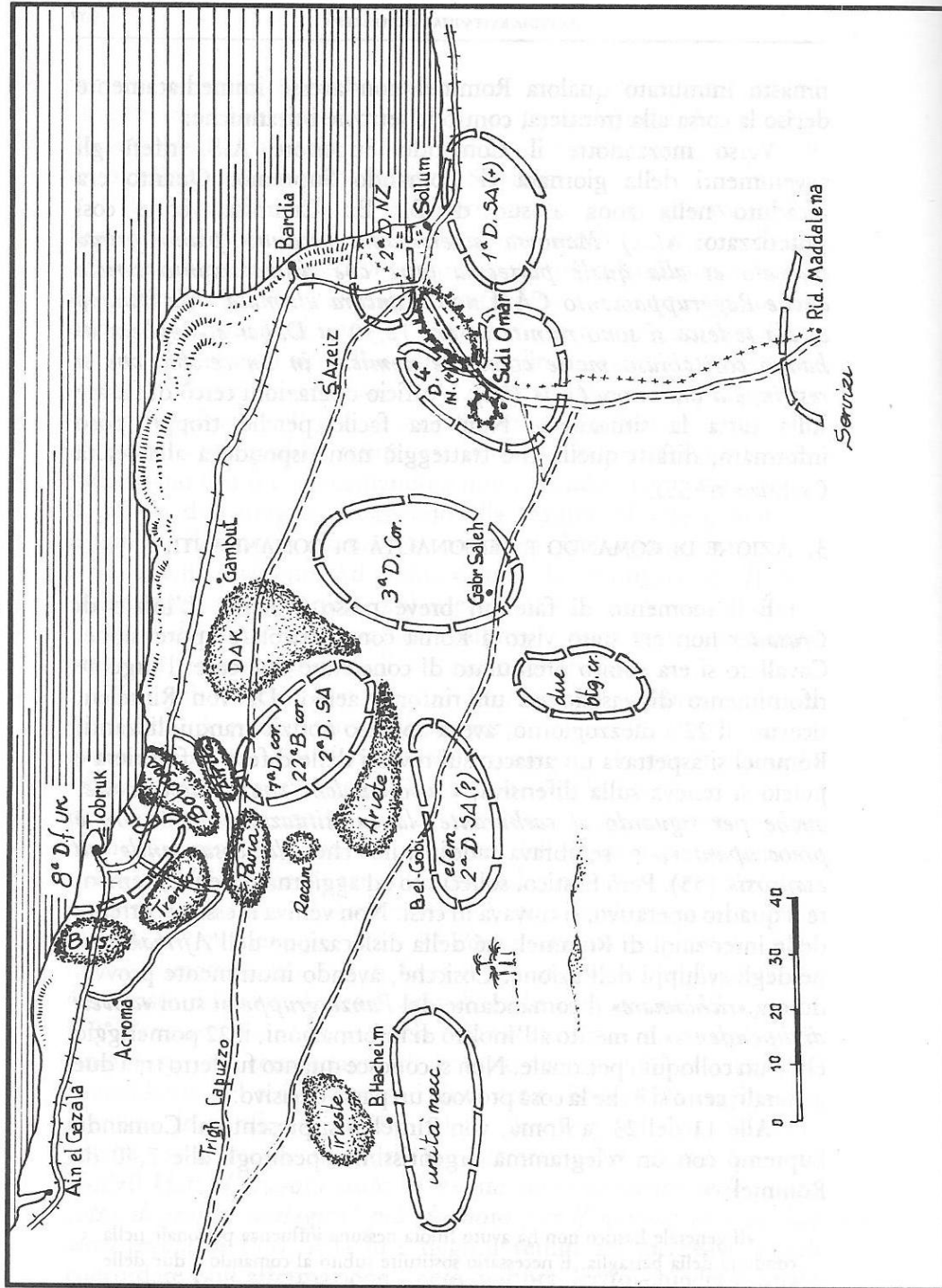
It's time to take a brief step back. The beginning of *Crusader* had not been seen in Rome with particular apprehension. Cavallero had immediately taken care of two particular things: the urgent supply of diesel fuel and air reinforcement. He was received by von Rintelen, on 22nd at noon, had heard reassuring news: Rommel had expected an attack on topple border defenses and therefore kept on the defensive, "*except some local counterattack, including with respect to fuel, whose situation is not worrying,*" and even that "*seemed the thing tends to be depleted*"⁽⁵⁵⁾. Though Bastico, urged to frequently update the operational framework, was in crisis. Was not informed of the intentions of Rommel, or location of the *Afrikakorps*, nor action developments. So, having needlessly proceeded to "call back" the *Panzergruppe* Commander's to his "dependents" duties with regard to the submission of information, the 22nd afternoon had a personal interview. You don't know what was said between the two generals, of course it is that what provoked a decisive step.

At 11:00 of the 23rd in Rome, von Rintelen was at the Comando Supremo with an urgent telegram sent at 07:40 by Rommel:

"General Bastico has so far no personal influence in the conduct of the battle. It is necessary to replace immediately the command of the two operations with the unified command of all units, which are found in Marmarica and Cyrenaica.

Schizzo n. 55

PRESUNTA SITUAZIONE BRITANNICA ALLA SERA DEL 23 NOVEMBRE
secondo il Comando Superiore A.S.



Could you please inform me in via the Duce this command with immediate effect because this is of crucial importance for the battle. Immediate response is required by radio.
(56).

The form is unacceptable. The procedure, likewise, incorrect: it is not over so the Commander of the theater of operations by appealing directly to the central authority of a country allied. On the substance, on the other hand, we must make a distinction. Accusing Bastico not intervened in the direction of the fight is extremely unjust claim, if not worse. Conduct and responsibility of the battle between Sollum and Tobruk were of Rommel, who had explicitly requested, and nothing still appeared to change the strategic direction of the battle in question. Indeed, the first few days of fighting had been widely enough to include such rapid change in status existed in a clash of armor and the Commander's *Panzergruppe* couldn't deny that had stunted the *Afrikakorps*. Just this reason, however, makes it prone to give reason to Rommel on the issue. The keep the Comando Superiore level risked objectively to affect the timeliness of intervention of the Corps of Maneuver. Not to mention that the Commander of the CAM, Gambara, had already personally too much tied by the fact that he retained the post of head of the G.S. Comando Superiore. Moreover, the distribution of responsibilities according to a geographical criterion rather simplistic, yet acceptable as long as the initiative was German-Italian, came suddenly to lose justification at the time of the entrance of the 8th Army in Marmarica. It is very true that the centralization in the hands of Rommel Corps withdrew to maneuver Bastico the only means concrete intervention in battle; However, we must recognize their appropriateness that all large mobile units were used only under guidance.

Mussolini read the telegram of Rommel and, with the approval of Cavallero, immediately telegraphed to Bastico and Rommel. At first he wrote:

“From the collection situation of having firm belief that this Marmarica battle must be unitary. I then decided that all Marmarica troops, including therefore Gambara Corps, pass immediately orders General Rommel that will then conduct the entire action under your command. More than ever on account value and the tenacity of the commanders and soldiers of Italy⁽⁵⁷⁾.”

To the second:

“By receiving this telegram I commend your units conduct of the Marmarica battle. All Marmarica troops pass to your orders. In this sense I have already telegraphed General Bastico. I'm sure it will lead You to the axis troops victory”⁽⁵⁸⁾.

The top commander acknowledged the blow. Aired in its entirety on the *Panzergruppe* dispatch's, stating to fulfill a proper office: “*Perform a duty to convey the following radio response from the Duce*” (...) and then added:

“Because, as said in the radio to direct me “*you'll take whole operation conducted under my command,*” the situation remains unchanged unless the centralization in your hands the mobile Army Corps units; This place is certain that your every operational intention, including the possible relocation of some grand units, must be promptly submitted for my approval. Remember the request of extensive, repeated and anxious news on the progress of the actions, given that the Comando Supremo will in turn be informed on the progress of these.

My command will continue to operate at Umm er-Rzem where resides also Mr. Gambara in his functions of my Chief of staff. Please accept that I join the wish that the Duce made for you and for the victory of the axis armies”⁽⁵⁹⁾.

Frankly the message has a tone of defiance and impulsiveness. How you could claim that any movement of any division is subject to prior approval? Such claims inevitably would provide to a Commandant, already impatient character constraints, an opportunity to act on its own initiative, demonstrating then easily as the circumstances have rendered unworkable the Statute of limitations. And also the fact that Gambara should remain at the Comando Superiore – and how could it be otherwise, since he was the head of the G.S.? -became absurd thought that the Maneuvering Corps would be thrown into the fray without a commander. The inconsistency of this last situation, to be true, was warned by Bastico, who turned to Cavallero:

“Current military Situation affects not only Marmarica but all of Libya. The need to coordinate complex multifaceted activities on all points & also closely followed by General Rommel in case major decisions, recommend that His Excellence Gambara wait in full only his functions and Chief of staff of the North African Armed Forces.

I therefore decided to allocate General Gioda to the Mobile Corps as interim commander authorized vice commander. I would appreciate your decision during the day”⁽⁶⁰⁾.

Evidently the person of Gambara was considered a kind of trump card, because Cavallero overthrew the solution envisaged:

“Duce provides that General Gambara retains Corps of Maneuver command to give all his assets to the battle underway since this will depend the fortune of Libya.

General Gambara will suspend his duties as Chief of staff until further order. To provide Staff with operating elements on site” ⁽⁶¹⁾.

Changing of dependencies was to take place at 21:00 of 23 November. By a 22nd radio message of the Comando Superiore ordered Gen. Mannerini are tomorrow at 07:00 under the command of XXI Corps, replacing Gambara, for an interview with Rommel. Only the next morning, therefore, knew of the change order Mannerini.

During the entire "Sunday of the Dead" Rommel was left practically isolated from what was happening between Bir Bu Creimisa Ridge and Bir el Gobi. Departed a good hour from el-Adem, new home of the *Panzergruppe* tactical Command, to reach Crüwell. It seems that along the way we stopped at the *Afrika* regiment, which clearly crossed some difficulty. Fact is that never reached the *Afrikakorps* and the whole day was unaware, or nearly so, happenings, including Crüwell's initiative to change his operating design. The latter at 18:50 sent a radio message to von Ravenstein so that to rebroadcast the command of the *Panzergruppe*:

“Corp Attack succeeded, most enemy forces destroyed. Advanced airport Sidi Rezegh line. Details of the operation still unclear. Many prisoners, captured a lot of material, tanks and guns.”

Certainly communication was very terse, but it was not easy to say much more. “*The wide space South of Sidi Rezegh-wrote Bayerlein-was transformed into a sea of dust, fumes and smoke's (...). At dusk, the battle was not yet over. 1610 of vehicles, tanks, artillery pieces in flames lit up the battleground of Sunday of the dead. Just after midnight you could have an overview of what happened and was able to deploy our units, establish the losses and achievements carried over and judge the whole situation*” ⁽⁶²⁾. Among other things, Crüwell was unaware of having lost his tactical Command and transmissions. He had news

by von Ravenstein, late at night, when they arrived after having managed to track down Neumann-Silkow as well. Broadly, the framework is presented in terms flattering: the 7th Armored Brigade had been destroyed on 21 November, the 4th had been the 22nd, the remnants of the 7th Armored Division and the bulk of the 1st South African Division had been the 23rd. "There is no more danger to Tobruk" reported the war diary of the *Afrikakorps*. It remained therefore that to pursue the enemy forces escaped and other units stationed in the space between the Trigh Capuzzo and el-Abd and Trigh destroy themselves. Of these "remnants", the New Zealand Division was the primary objective. After that the game would have ended with the sifting of the battlefield to capture the material abandoned by opponent and retrieve their vehicles were immobilized. But Rommel thought otherwise. Around midnight he sent to Berlin the usual daily report. Summarizing events there and exhibited the purposes:

- "1. in order to ensure the uniform conduct of operations, Duce has transferred the command of all the Italian troops in Marmarica to General Rommel with immediate effect.
2. The concentric attack of the DAK with the cooperation of the *Ariete* Armored Division to the South-East of Tobruk has achieved full success after stubborn fighting. Most of the British 7th Armored Division is probably surrounded. The Sollum -Bardia holds again against strong attacks enemy armored units.
3. Intentions for 24 November:
 - A. completes the destruction of the 7th Armored Division.
 - B. Advance a part of the forces towards Sidi Ornar in order to attack the enemy on the Sollum front.
4. Enemy column marching on Benghazi-Ajdabiya, according to Italian reports reached the oasis of Gialo (280 km southeast Ajdabiya).
5. many prisoners, including a general. Yet many tanks destroyed. Details about material captured as soon as known".

More or less around that time had been given to the arrangements following the 3rd Recon Group, pushed onto the Trigh Capuzzo towards Bir el Chleta, takes open-the via Balbia and performed a reconnaissance in force over Bardia and fort Capuzzo, and would prepare you to support *Fliegerführer* advanced in the direction of Bir Sheferzen, with an armed reconnaissance on astride the Trigh el-Abdo as synthesizing the report compiled by the *Panzergruppe* command of few's week later: "*the Commander in Chief decided to chase the enemy with his armored divisions in order to restore the situation on the front of Sollum and*

at the same time advance against the British rear in Sidi Omar ⁽⁶³⁾. In particular, Rommel confided to Lt. Col. Westphal, *Panzergruppe* chief operations officer, which aimed to destroy the remains of the 8th Army and the interruption of retreat towards Egypt, putting himself at the head of the *Afrikakorps* with the *Ariete* in reinforcement. Had to be back on the evening of the same day 24th or, at the latest, on the morning of the 25th. Westphal, who had to remain at the tactical Command ⁽⁶⁴⁾, could not refrain from pointing out that it would have been dangerous for the *Afrikakorps* stray much from Tobruk, considered the danger of a new attempt of the garrison to sortie during the arrival of fresh forces from the East. But Rommel did not change opinion. This note without having traded even a word with Crüwell and without knowing the State of efficiency or better the wear and tear of the *Afrikakorps*.

At 4 o'clock in the morning Rommel went from Neumann-Silkow. Not meeting Crüwell, who had just left the command of the 15th *Panzerdivision*, but could talk shortly after, at 13 km of the Axis Road. Finally, at 06:00, the Commander of the DAK was able to put his superior abreast of events to the South of Tobruk. Both generals were well aware of the need to build on the success. For Crüwell, as has been said, what translated into cleaning up the space between the Trigh eliminating the wreckage of 30th Corp and capturing usable materials. For Rommel, however, the information received were a further boost to follow the first impulse: "*The offensive group of Tobruk-he said-is largely settled. We now fall upon on the enemy to the eastern front and annihilate the New Zealanders and the Indians before they are joined with the remnants of the defeated Group*" ⁽⁶⁵⁾. At the same time we take Bir Habata and Maddalena to prevent the enemy's supply. There's not a minute to lose. Must exploit the depressing effect of the defeat and proceed at full speed with all units towards Sidi Omar ⁽⁶⁶⁾. The roundup of the battlefield would have been accomplished by Sümmerrmann's infantry.

It is worth to dwell a little on this plan. Critical analysis to it its fervent supporters from the determined detractors. Let's start by those who were close to him in the hours in which he had a decision. Crüwell, who was the last to know the ideas of his master, he argued repeatedly convenience to settle out and secure the loot before the enemy could

recover or surrendered when Rommel turned to von Ravenstein telling him: *"you have a chance to put an end to the campaign tonight."* Westphal, who was one of the first to be informed of the operational design and immediately formulated objections against what seemed like a risky move, later commented: *"Rommel, overestimating the success achieved, committed at this point, a serious and, as regards the fight around Tobruk, decisive error"* ⁽⁶⁷⁾. Such negative assessments were endorsed by Carver: *"Rommel's plan was more ambitious [than Crüwell] or was about to embark on an undertaking which, although was brilliantly conceived, was based on a picture of the situation, too fake picture that with the passage of time is increasingly detached from reality. The reckless way in which he led personally contributed largely to his failure and was almost the direct cause of the defeat of his army (...). The fact that he was considering to implement his plan in twelve or, at most, in 48 hours, indicating a degree of optimism that verged on the madness and confirmed allegations of Halder"* ⁽⁶⁸⁾.

According to Bayerlein, head of the G.S. of the Afrikakorps, instead, *"Rommel's decision is certainly the more daring than they've ever taken and was criticized by the German authorities that they were never able to figure out exactly how this theatre of war"* ⁽⁶⁹⁾. Liddell Hart shared the opinion of Bayerlein. Exploitation of success on a local scale--annihilate the remnants of 30 Corps scattered or eliminate New Zealanders or attack Tobruk--not strategically decisive results would have allowed, indeed would have presented a risk of attrition of forces that the Afrikakorps couldn't stand. Having to avoid a battle of attrition was that deep penetration with armored forces available in the heart of the enemy's rear, in order to induce materially and psychologically Cunningham to desist from offensive and withdraw and Rommel or not imagined that Cunningham just that day wanted to abandon the game! *"Afterwards-observed Liddell Hart-many have criticized the Rommel's counterattack as a header or but the story of the war shows that on many occasions such strikes were successful, mainly due to their impact on morale and, even more, on one of their commanders. The goodness of this solution was also confirmed by the experience of Rommel. Twice already in the past, in April and in June, he had caused a English retreat - in*

the first case a real collapse-with strategic shots unleashed analogues with more modest forces and that it had come to threaten the enemy rear (...). In addition, in November 1941 British forces were more dispersed and fragmented than in any of the other cases where its strategic replicas were crowned with full success” ⁽⁷⁰⁾.

Even in the opponent's camp there had been interventions from above. If Bastico felt cut off from the fight, Cunningham had often felt uneasy about deficiencies in the links. The initial doubts caused by the absence of concrete news about the *Afrikakorps* was succeeded, on the 22nd, the concern for the reassuring little news coming from the battlefield. Reflected on the mission entrusted to the 6th Brigade of Barrowclough late evening and ordered that the entire New Zealand Division is steered towards Sidi Rezegh, except the bare minimum necessary to control the troops from behind the garrisons of Bardia and Sollum. At 06:30 on the 23rd, while you had to hurry Freyberg on Trigh Capuzzo with the 4th Brigade in support of Barrowclough ⁽⁷¹⁾, Cunningham departed from their advanced Command, to fort Maddalena, to travel by car to the 13th Corps Command, at Bir Sheferzen. Had decided to substantially revise the plan, determining the objectives and tasks on a new basis. In other words, the 13th Corps would direct the use of "infantry" unit (i.e., the New Zealand Division, the 1st and the garrison of Tobruk) to break the siege of Tobruk and the 30th Corps *“continue the destruction of enemy armored forces, given every assistance required from the 13th Corps in its operations against Tobruk and reject around (...) you protected the left flank of the 13th Corps and the supply lines (...)»*. Gen. Godwin-Austen had no objections to formulate and Cunningham went to fort Maddalena. Here were moving the bad news concerning the fights of the 22nd, the 7th Armored brigade had remained without tanks, the 22nd was reduced to one third, of the 4th no one knew anything and, in General, *“the situation of the 30th Corps was still very confused.”* It was clear that the decisions taken shortly before they became of problematic implementation. As a result, Cunningham called at noon on Gen. Godwin-Austen and Maj. Carver, Chief of 30 Corps operations, representing Gen. Norrie, absolutely committed in the conduct of the battle against the *Deutsches Afrikakorps*.

The problem concerned the situation of the 30th Corps would be able to withdraw to allow the meeting

of New Zealand and South African infantry under Godwin-Austen? These, in turn, was aghast, convinced as it was that the clash between armor had already been won by Norrie, though it "*scandalized*" when he seemed to understand that the Commander of the 8th Army was already considering "*if it was wise to continue the battle*" ⁽⁷²⁾. The 13th Corps, in fact, had largely intact units, including tank regiments and he didn't see why he should give up the march on Tobruk. Wanted to talk by radio with Norrie, who were at 14:00, the lull that Sunday's fatal-declared "*perfectly able to cope with the situation for you the rest of the day, if you had counterattacked the enemy*" ⁽⁷³⁾. Godwin-Austen, indeed, from the radio conversation was under the impression that 30th Corps, until it reorganized, it wasn't under the best conditions to exert a decisive weight in the fight or to lead the liberation of Tobruk, as originally envisaged; so much so that in a letter sent to Freyberg in the late afternoon, through a liaison officer, expressed very explicitly:

"I just came back from 30th Corp located in trouble (...). Our losses were extremely heavy and (...) it may be that we find ourselves with less tanks, except for the «1», of the enemy (...). It is not the case (...) to get discouraged about the State of our 30th Corp. We deal with and destroy the enemy tanks with our guns and our tanks «1». I am absolutely determined to liberate Tobruk (...). I heard raise the issue of a withdrawal date, but I refuse to take it into account when our perspectives, overall, are so rosy compared to those of the opponent, whose mobile forces are so small (...)" ⁽⁷⁴⁾.

Cunningham was clearly failing, so resolve to asked Auchinleck an urgent personal action. Cairo had an air of tranquility. Just the day before, the Commander in Chief had informed Churchill that "*seems ... There are good prospects of achieving our aim immediately, i.e. the destruction of the German armored forces*" and later:

"The morale and momentum demonstrated by commanders and from too many were excellent. In my opinion, Cunningham fought this battle so far extremely complicated with great skill and daring (...). I believe that the outcome of the battle depends largely on whether a significant percentage of the tanks of the German 15th Armored Division has already taken part in the clashes, along with the 21st Panzer Division, during the last four days, or whether it is more or less intact. I hope it is true the first hypothesis but I can't still be certain." ⁽⁷⁵⁾.

The appeal-very significant-the 8th Army took so Auchinleck rather surprise. at fort Maddalena in the evening accompanied by Tedder and was obviously a noticeably depressed environment, as the situation deteriorated further: the 5th South African Brigade destroyed the 7th Armored Division dispersed, the 30 Corps upset. Auchinleck was to rise to the occasion. He realized that the crucial point was the residual availability of tanks. After five days of fierce fighting and incessant movement there was just hope to be left with a tank number equal to that of the opponent. The initial quantitative superiority was gone and most importantly the best on *Panzer* looked better (in return the Italian M 13 were worst). Not calculating infantry tanks, too slow to participate in an armored battle, you could probably count on one hundred tanks efficient, most *Stuart*, against all enemies, about half of which Germans. According to Cunningham had to choose between continuing the offensive with the risk of losing the last tanks, and with the 8th Army and Egypt, or abandon the game and save the army and Egypt. The conclusion was implied. But Auchinleck was stopped:

"I had no hesitation about the right solution [to be] and immediately imparted the provisions General Cunningham continue the offensive with the aim to reoccupy Sidi Rezegh and make contact with the garrison of Tobruk, it seemed that the enemy had been severely challenged and subjected to maximum effort and this was confirmed by his recent behavior in battle: he was hitting here and there and everywhere in what seemed a desperate effort to refrain from creating havoc in our files and prepare the way to regain the initiative"⁽⁷⁶⁾,

Cunningham is aligned to the top and thought to 22:30 consequential orders sent. The 13th Corps would assume the responsibility of operations aimed at breaking the blockade of Tobruk from zero hours of the 24th, with Sidi Rezegh and ed Duda as the first goal. 30 Corps had to settle out immediately, protecting the 1st South African Division from episodes of tanks, arriving in New Zealand Division assistance in the event of a strong armored attack, finally protect the rear of 13 Corps by penetration from Bir el Gobi. Such orders, not certain easy executed, is concluded with an amazing phrase: "*the strength in tanks indicated by the message of 22 November 30th Corp should give ample guarantees about the performance of these tasks: without prejudice to the primary role of the armored forces, which is to destroy the enemy tanks*"⁽⁷⁷⁾.

NOTE TO CHAPTER 7.

- (1) it was just movements of units and supply randomly auto-column more intense during that time.
- (2) The *Pavia* was still ongoing organic transformation. At the time, it included: Division Command, 27th and 28th Infantry Regiment (two battalions and regimental colors), XVII accompanying weapons battaglione and anti-tank artillery, 3rd Quick (with two groups of 75/27), XVII. engineering battalion and service units. From time to time will be reinforced by various units: VI group *Lancieri Aosta*, III/19th *Brescia* infantry, 1/40th *Bologna* infantry, 11/26th artillery, III/24th, artillery etc.
- (3) The *Bologna* was also undergoing transformation. On November 19 it consisted of: Division Command, 39th and 40th infantry (with two riflemen battalions and a battalion accompanying and anti-tank weapons incomplete), xxv accompanying battalion and anti-tank artillery, 205th (with two groups of 100/17 and one from 75/27), the XXV engineering battalion and services unit. In: 11/24^o Corps artillery from 105/28, a company of sappers.
- (4) The 7th Armored Brigade consisted of: Brigade Command (4 *cruisers* and 5 tanks for close support), 7th *Queen's Own Hussards* (37 *cruisers* and 12 *Crusader*), 2nd *Royal Tanks* (47 *cruisers*), 6th *Royal Tanks* (*Crusader* 41), 4th horse artillery less one battery (16 guns of 25 pounds), an anti-tank section and a company of the II Battalion of the *Rifle Brigade*.
- (5) The 7th support group consisted of: I battalion *King's Royal Rifle Corps* and II battalion *Rifle Brigade* (both less one company), 3rd horse artillery (36 guns by Pounder anti-tank 2), a battery of 51st from the country (10 pieces of 25 pounds), 60th campaign artillery (24 pieces of 25 pounds), a light anti-aircraft battery.
- (6) The Germans declared lost a Pzkw III and two Pzkw II, besides a Pzkw IV abandoned because damaged, and destroyed eight *Stuart*. the 5th *Royal Tank*, which had several affected but only four tanks destroyed, claimed to feel out of action "at least twenty *Panzer*".
- (7) J.A.I. AGAR- HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 158.
- (8) The British report 26 out of action or damaged tanks and it was estimated to have hit about 30 *Panzer*.
- (9) On the maps of the Comando Superiore the 2nd and 3rd Armored Division will continue to appear until 30 November.
- (10) see H.O. BEHRENDT, op. cited above, p. 134.
- (11) E. ROMMEL, op. cited, map out text color.
- (12) it was instead of force and, under the command of Gen. Reid, consisting of an a part of the 29th Indian Brigade reinforced by South African units.
- (13) Regiment Group Recon of Maneuvering Corps (RECAM).
- (14) J.A.I. AGAR HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 198.
- (15) The 32nd tank Brigade consisted of a squadron of *King's Dragoon Guards* and one of 7th *Royal Tanks* from 1st and 4th *Royal Tanks*. The detachment of the 14th

- the Brigade was formed from the II *York and Lancaster* Battalion, and the II *Black Watch* Battalion,; the 16th Brigade from II *King's Own* battalion. Fire support was provided by 1st, 104th and 107th horse artillery and 144th field artillery.
- (16) Davy was later to comment that Gott had spent much of the day to visit the wards, some of whom a 30 km distant from the command of the Division. This distance also affect negatively on the grip of the situation shown on command maps Division and on the calculation of enemy losses- always estimated very in excess-compared to reality.
- (17) By the English the advance of 6th *Royal Tanks* was compared to the charge of the light brigade at Balaclava.
- (18) Gen. Davy was very amazed at the delay by Armstrong, who was unaware he had been stopped by Gott, and Scott-Cockburn, who didn't know he had been sent to Gabr Saleh.
- (19) The Brigade had lost 25 tanks for only mechanical trouble since having left Bir el Gobi.
- (20) I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 46.
- (21) C. AUCHINLECK, Despatch, p. 338.
- (22) J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, pp. 198-199.
- (23) according to the report compiled by the information Office of the *Afrikakorps*, the British had employed during the day the following armored vehicles: 260 *cruisers* of 7th and 22nd armored brigade, the Tobruk garrison of 80 *Malilda*, 170 *cruisers* of 4th armored brigade and 3th *Royal Tanks*, 150 *Malilda* of the 1st Royal Tanks on the Sollum. Hence, altogether 230 infantry tanks and 430 *cruisers* (H.O. BEHRENDT, op. cited, p. 135).
- (24) after the collision on the Trigh Capuzzo the regiment was left with just 17 tanks.
- (25) Rommel was probably indicate the East part of the Sidi Rezegh Ridge.
- (26) Reported by J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 197.
- (27) it was an essentially artillery deployment, had hastily from Gen. Boettcher on the orders of Rommel.
- (28) Composed of 11/104th infantry III/104th (8th machine-gun battalion already) and artillery units.
- (29) B.H. LIDDELL. HART, op. cited above, p. 119.
- (30) The 21st *Panzerdivision* reported the loss of 9 tanks and claimed to have knocked out 19 *cruisers*.
- (31) some thirty of 3rd and 5th *Royal Tanks*, at least 40 of 8th Hussars and about ten of the Brigade Command, plus the missing of the 3rd and 5th Regiment, which wandered disoriented and that would be gathered to their respective units in the night and the following morning.

- (32) The Brigade consisted of three battalions: the 1st S.A. *Irish*, the 2nd *Botha* Regiment and the 3rd *Transvaal Scottish* and a machine-gun company.
- (33) J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 217. The Battalion had 120 losses.
- (34) Under German fire the 8th Hussars deviated westwards, but met other *Panzer* who had bypassed. In the darkness the Hussars tried to stay in the circle: "it was clear they were surrounded or attacked by mistake from friendly forces "(m. CARVER, op. cited, p. 85).
- (35) Originally from the German side it was believed captured the Commander of the Brigade, but it was Col. Stirling.
- (36) 1st Brigade consisted of: Brigade Command, 24th, 25th and 26th battalion, 30th field battery, an anti-tank section and a squadron of *Valentine* (the latter reinforcement).
- (37) J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 222.
- (38) Ibid, p. 228.
- (39) The remains of 7th armored brigade consisted of three brigade command tanks, ten of 7th Hussars and few others of 2nd and 6th *Royal Tank*. In particular, the staff of the latter was traveling to Egypt to reorganize and retrofitted the regiment.
- (40) The historical Diary XXI Corps.
- (41) According to the war diary of the DAK "the message was too long and contained enough details that had no importance for the *Afrikakorps*".
- (42) The column consisted of command 132nd infantry tank, 8th and 9th battalion M 13 (each with two companies), V/8° bersaglieri reinforced, I/132nd group artillery batteries from 65/17 flying transferred from RECAM, a 105/28 and from 102/35. Bir el Gobi-the V/8th bersaglieri had to be replaced by a battalion of Trieste.
- (43) J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited, p, 249.
- (44) see footnote 16.
- (45) Ibid, p. 253.
- (46) see footnote 16.
- (47) E. ROMMEL, op. sketch above, p. 78. Such a sketch, such as those relating to collisions of days 21 and 22 (p. 76), is a summary and inaccurate, so as to give the idea of a concept completely different from the actual operation.
- (48) I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, op. cited, map No. 9, p. 44.
- (49) J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 253 et seq.
- (50) RAINER KRIEBEL (former Staff Officer of the 15th *Panzerdivision*) Feldzug in Northern Africa 1941-1943, vol. I reported in J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 243.

- (51) R. KRIEBEL, op. cited, quoted in AGAR-HAMILTON and TURNER, op. mentioned p. 255.
- (52) J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 260.
- (53) Ibid, p. 271.
- (54) DSCSAS, tele. 19734/0p. date 23.11.1941, at 23.45.
- (55) Diary Cavallero.
- (56) DSCS, tele s.n. 23. date 11.1941, at 7.40 of Jan. Rommel.
- (57) DSCS, tele 30959 date 23.11.1941, at 12.15.
- (58) DSCS, tele 30960 date 23.11.1941.
- (59) DSCSAS, tele/01 49 T. date 24.11.1941.
- (60) DSCSAS, tele 01/51 date 24.11.1941, at 12.30.
- (61) DSCS, tele s.n. date 25.11.1941.
- (62) E. ROMMEL, op.. cited above, pp. 80-81.
- (63) J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 282.
- (64) Strangely, Rommel walked away with the Army Chief of staff, Gause, leaving the head office site operations instead of bringing the latter and leave Gause in tactical command. Von Mellenthin was to comment: Rommel had some strange Ideas about basic principles of the work of staff. A particularly irritating feature was his interference in matters that fall under the responsibility of the Chief of staff. Rommel was natural that usually the Chief of staff to accompany him in his visits to the front, which frequently resulted in travel literally on the front line. This was charge down to the normal rule that the Army Chief of staff replacing the Commander-in-Chief during his absence ' (op. cited, p. 54).
- (65) as you can see, there is no reference to the hypothetical existence of a second British armored Division.
- (66) E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 81.
- (67) SIEGFRIED WESTPHAL, *Heerin Fesseln*, Athenaeum Verlag, Bonn 1950, p. 168.
- (68) M. CARVER, op. cited above, p. 99.
- (69) E. ROMMEL, op. , cited above, p. 82.
- (70) B.H. LIDDELL. HART, military history of World War II, cit., pp. 267-268.
- (71) Against Bardia- Sollum was the 5th Brigade of Gen. J. Hargest. Freyberg reached Barrowclough the 24.
- (72) J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 285.

- (73) D. CARVER, op. cited above, p. 101.
- (74) J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 285.
- (75) W. CHURCHILL., op. cited above, p. 215.
- (76) C. AUCHINLECK, Dispatch cit., p. 339. :My opinion-said later Auchinleck-was different from that of Cunningham. I thought that Rommel probably was in a bad condition as ours, especially with Tobruk impregnable to the flanks and ordered to continue the offensive. Certainly played gambling (in fact, continuing the battle, we could lose everything) and the facts could very well prove that Cunningham was right and I was wrong! " (C. BARNETT, op. cited, p. 166).
- (77) J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 288.

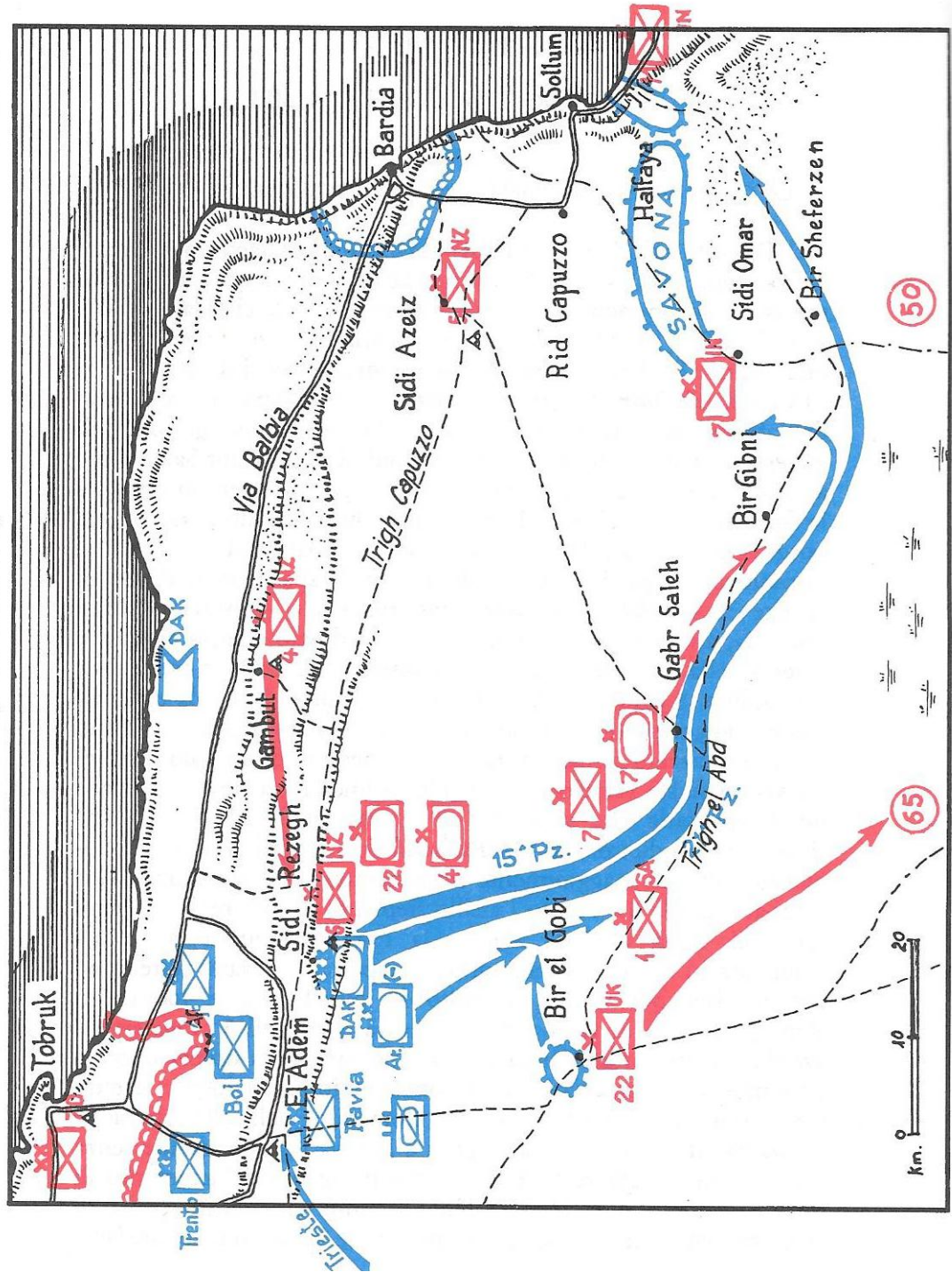
Chapter Eighth ROMMEL'S COUNTERATTACK

1. THE RACE TO BIR SHEFERZEN (24 NOVEMBER).

During the night of the 24th the *Afrikakorps* had gathered near the Bir Bu Creimisa Ridge. The three armored divisions were roughly on a slant that alignment from South of hill 178 went to the airfield of Sidi Rezegh: in order, the *Ariete* (or rather the Di Nisio column), the 15th and 21st *Panzerdivision*. The hours spent in clam interrupted only by the influx of supplies., Was at 08:45 which came the orders to “chase” the opponent on the Sidi Rezegh-Gabr Saleh and then riding the Trigh el Abd, eastward to trap enemy forces operating on front of Sollum, but wasn't what recently put back into order quickly and units assume march disposition. At 10:40 Rommel, irritated, decided to start the 5th *Panzerregiment* in the footsteps of the enemy "*at full speed*", although not completely cleared up and without waiting for the rest of the Division. And to be sure of the execution of the order, literal reached von Ravenstein which opened the way and stayed with him not ceasing for a moment by the spur the column. All armored Corp began moving within a couple of hours and, gradually, acquired speed in a straight line, regardless of the opposing unit that exceeded and also to those who remained behind. The 15th *Panzerdivision*, started around midday and thus better reorganized, advanced compact enough but the 21st, under Rommel's quivering, worry disengage along the Trigh el Abd. While the head was the furious Gallop towards the border, units lost ground and ended up being involved in small local clashes with enemy elements of various kinds (sketch No. 56). the 5th *Panzerregiment* was enduring a heavy day: about an hour after the start had a English motorized column up to the Southeast (probably the command of 7th Armoured Division and the support group) and had it cut into two without break though towards 15:00 runs into a deployment of tanks and cannons and blocked. Not only was there no shared anti-tank and field artillery, but the ammunition began to be

LA CORSA DI ROMMEL VERSO LA FRONTIERA
(24 novembre 1941)

Schizzo n. 56



in short supply. The onset of Knabe Group (104th Rifle with the artillery units) on the right was not much relief because it “*surpassed the regiment and disappearing on the horizon.*”

The third column of armored Corps was formed from the *Ariete*. At 08:00 with Gen. Mannerini had gone to el-Adem, at the command of *Panzergruppe*. Rommel had asked for information on the Corps Of Maneuver and delivered the first verbal orders: the *Trieste* had to move from Bir Hakeim to the area of el-Adem and recon grouping to replace the residual part of the *Ariete* on the positions of Bir el Gobi ⁽¹⁾. Mannerini returned to command the CAM at 10:45 and immediately sent out executive orders. The task assigned by Rommel to *Ariete* was in some ways complementary to the "in depth" of the *Afrikakorps*. The Division was to first get together, then bring on the Trigh el Abd at Gabr Meliha, facing Northeast and poised to continue towards the North and Northeast. The meeting point between the Divisional column from Bir el Gobi-and that of Gen. Di Nisio, who after the battle was collecting for about ten kilometers Northwest of Bir el Haiad-, was established in Hagfet el-Hareiba. While moving up to Gabr Meliha, *Ariete* would have flanked the descent of the *Afrikakorps*. This operational orientation communicated by phone Gen. Balotta on the evening of the 23rd. But things went differently. The move of the Division was at least partly influenced by the arrival of the recon group. Now this-that in the afternoon of 23rd had been arrested Northwest of Hagfet el-Gueitinat, After having worked for the whole morning in between el-Adem and Bir el Gobi-in order to prevent infiltrations between the *Pavia* and the *Ariete* -first (00:45 hours of the 24th) was instructed to make contact with the *Pavia*, which he managed to achieve only at 14:00 due to difficulties in terrain and some minor clash, then (22:45 hours the same 24th) to replace the units of *Ariete* to Bir el Gobi. Ultimately, the two columns of the Italian Armored Division left Bir el Gobi, respectively (where they remained and some Divisional Services Units) and Bir el Haiad-toward 13:00, heading to Hagfet el-Hareiba. For more ignored the tactic situation ⁽²⁾ and shortly after 16:00 it interrupted radio links, so that until the next day, the *Ariete* was devoid of contacts with both the *Afrikakorps* and the Corps Of Maneuver. Throughout the Marmarica the pawns of the axis were moving more or less in isolation. But not only those of the axis.

During the night of the 24th, Gott had proceeded to collect the 7th Armored Division “in *an area between the Trigh el Abd and Trigh Capuzzo*”-this the 30 Corps Command-and slowly managed to reassemble the unit. At dawn on the 24th the 4th Armored Brigade, with the 3rd and 4th *Royal Tanks*, was collected at Bir el-Dara, about ten kilometers South-East of Sidi Muftah; the 22nd Armoured Brigade and 7th support group were found a few kilometres further South; the 7th Armored Brigade was at Bir el-Reghem el-Garbi and the 1st South African Brigade in seven to eight kilometers west of the town. At Bir Berraneb, Bir el-between Reghem, el-Garbi and the Trigh el Abd, there was the command of the 7th Armored Division and the tactical of 30th Corps. The availability of efficient tanks was limited: forty *Stuart* of the 4th Brigade, twenty *Crusader* of the 22nd and about ten of the 7th: there were roughly seventy tanks at the time that remained to Gott.

At 08:00 the 4th and 22nd Armored Brigade received orders to head for the North to protect the left flank of New Zealanders; all remaining units prepared to regroup with the calm. Most of all they needed breath of commands and services. Around 10:00 arrived at the 30 Corps Advanced Command with Gen. Godwin-Austen to direct operations agreements ordered by Cunningham. Norrie wasn't there: he had wanted to appear in person by Gott that the interview took place in radio speech. According to Norrie 13th Corp was supposed to go unite on Tobruk, but of course it was necessary to solve in any way the problems associated with the frontier. Godwin-Austen departed, Cunningham came in person, by plane. As soon as we landed was led by car until the Command of the 7th Armored (Division) and during the short conversation with the Army Commander had to observe -according to the memory of Norrie - that “*things didn't go according to the plan, and all in all should begin to think about how the troops starting positions, if you were to impart a generic order agenda*”⁽³⁾. “*While the three generals were thinking about the next battle, I was near here and the only witness - he wrote - suddenly someone shouted orders, you heard a whistle and all began to be decidedly of coming a long way. I took the car near Mike Carver and asked. "What the hell's going on?" "A lot of things," Mike said - Rommel is charging as an enraged bull in a China shop with three or*

four *Panzer* columns. Two down from the North and are directed by this part (...). By sheer bad luck, a third column from the West has found a gap in the flanks of the tanks and it happened right on South African Division's command and its unarmed transports. Ten miles west from here there is a hellish scuffle that is shifting quickly from this part!"

⁽⁴⁾. While Cunningham was brought back to the airstrip, Norrie looked at the clock. It was 11:45: "*The official departure time-commented the 30 Corps Commander-of what some called the "obstacle of Matruh"*".

Meanwhile the 1st South African Brigade had brought to Bir el-Taieb Esem, Trigh el Abd. Pienaar was settling in defense when an urgent radio message in *Afrikaans* from part of the command of the Division advised that two German columns were running towards the South and were already a few kilometers from the Trigh. Pienaar did not even have time to give the alarm that a stream of fugitives, with vehicles, tanks and cannons crossed from side to side the Brigade, dragging the South African Echelon B with them.

"That day-he wrote a war correspondent-we fled for nine hours. Later all were plagued by fear, disoriented and unaware of what was happening. At each stop spreading more fantastic entries. Nobody had orders. Each in his own way he explained the retreat and no one had precise plans, except a frantic anxiety to rejoin his unit (...). During that long agonizing stroke began to understand what is really panic. We were running away from an unknown threat, the enemy and ourselves. We didn't know who was chasing, nor how many they were, nor how long they would have hunted, nor if eventually would be able to join us. We didn't know even what to do. If anyone had had the necessary authority to order: "*Stop here. Do this or that*", half of our fear was lessening. Only now (...) I realized the importance of a thousand little things apparently insignificant that constitute the military life. The exercises, the obligation of the greeting, the uniforms, the marks that you wear on the sleeve of the coat, they all aim to identify an individual with an efficient apparatus and then to inspire a sense of order and security. At the moment of peril the soldier uses his draw on *routine* mechanics an impression of strength and solidity."⁽⁵⁾.

Though the escape not involved most units at the hand of the commanders or only marginally affected by the direction of the German advance. Pienaar was able to put in battery 24 guns of 25 lbs. and sixteen medium caliber and to open fire on the long column of the 21st *Panzerdivision*, although with mediocre results. GateHouse with the 4th Armored Brigade and Scott-Cockburn

with the 22nd remained in the area of Sidi Muftah; Campbell, who had led the support Group to Gabr Saleh, tried to form a barrier; Davy, who was leading the 7th Armored Brigade toward the precious 62nd field deposit (about 25 kilometers south to Gabr Saleh), stopped his last few tanks Southeast of Gabr Saleh. Basically, an endurance, albeit isolated groups, quickly took effect. *"For forty miles said the Gen. Davy-patrs of our forces were again in action against the enemy. First, because of its speed of movement, the reject could be attacked only on the sides. But in the end, around 16:00, appeared fragmented into parts, so that they can be locked"* ⁽⁶⁾.

Cunningham returned to the fort Maddalena around midday and was ready for him written directives from Auchinleck in the morning. Took stock of the situation and stated that the only appropriate alternative was to continue the offensive and that *"the risk that it entails must be accepted,"* the Commander in chief concluded:

"4. You must therefore:

(I) Continue to relentlessly attack the opponent with all your means to the last tank;

(II) Your immediate goal is to destroy enemy armored forces;

(III) Your ultimate goal is the conquest of Cyrenaica and then the advance on Tripoli.

5. In order to attain the objectives referred to in para. 4 of basic importance is:

(I) Regain the positions of Sidi Rezegh-Ed Duda as soon as possible and make contact with the garrison. It seems to me essential that the garrison of Tobruk give all collaboration, up to the limit of its possibilities, in such an operation.

(II) Direct the *Oasis Force* soon against the coastal road to stop the traffic on it and if possible take Ajdabiya or Benina, none of which appears very defended.

(III) Use the patrols of the *Long Range Desert Group* offensively, at the limit of their strength, against any possible objective enemy communications lines from Ajdabiya, Mechili to Benghazi, and beyond, to the West. All armored cars available must be used in such offensive action with the utmost ruthlessness. The advantages that an effort decided against enemy communications lines let you capture are huge risks to be addressed" ⁽⁷⁾.

It seems that optimism and firmness of Auchinleck command 8th Army take the ever more convinced that the enemy made extreme effort and that he could not afford

heavy losses, given the small number of *Panzer* remaining. So the situation was considered "*really very supportive*". After this injection of confidence, Cunningham wanted to make personal contact with Godwin-Austen and went in flight to Sidi Azeiz. But in return, around 15:00, was able to see the dust cloud raised by three long parallel columns from Gabr Saleh and headed toward the border. "*While we were flying over the border wire-he had to remember-and I looked down and saw a tank battle unfold. When I went back to Headquarters, nobody wanted to believe me. Rommel was precisely in the direction of my base of supplies: water and food*" ⁽⁸⁾. Of course spoke of the thing with Auchinleck, but the quiet security of these emerged: "*is doing a desperate effort, but does not reach very far. It is simple that column of tanks cannot receive supplies. I'm sure*" ⁽⁹⁾. Assuming that the danger represented by the German could not be but that limited, it became obvious that the operations of 13th Corp towards Tobruk should continue; the 7th Indian Brigade placed under hold the one enemy and the 5th Indian Brigade covered the head of Bir Misheifa railway; the 2nd South African Division will proceed to intervene early in the fight. Also any disorganized units had to be put back in order as soon as it touched the border and, drawing on the reserve, it was necessary to give hand to the establishment of a new armored units.

At 16:00 Rommel reached the wire at Gasr el-Abd with the head of the 21st *Panzerdivision*. Was liaison with the various units because the radio had remained on the road. In addition he had built a picture of the situation quite different from reality. First believed that the 4th Indian Division was in close contact with all the southern front of the Italian-German positions on the border, from Sidi Omar to the Halfaya pass; then the 2nd New Zealand Division was collecting Northwest of Sollum. As always-in his opinion-there was more cause for concern about 30 Corp, was therefore an opportunity to crush 13 Corp against the border positions. Having no other hand, ordered von Ravenstein to go immediately with their tactical Command-without waiting at least a few consistent units-up to about ten kilometers south of the Halfaya pass and to spend the night waiting for the bulk of the Division. Ravenstein obeyed, probably without

any enthusiasm since I had just about any vehicle. An hour later came Crüwell, another with a few vehicles in tow. What he said Rommel was synthesized from the war diary of the *Afrikakorps*:

“I sent Ravenstein to the Halfaya pass. The task of the *Afrikakorps* is to operate with the [Italian] motorized Corps, to crush and destroy the enemy East of Sollum, West of Sollum and Bardia. To do this: the 21st *Panzerdivision* turn east of Sollum; the 15th *Panzer* blocked every way out South with half of his forces on both sides of the wire and the Centre at Gasr el-Abd. The *Ariete* is coming to the West, the *Trieste* on the side of the *Ariete*. 21st and 15th *Panzer* will force the enemy against the minefields on the Sollum and force him to surrender. The 33rd reconnaissance group will push forward on Habata to lock down the slope so that the enemy is unable to use it to withdraw or to refuel”.

It is not clear what times Rommel redesign to implement this draft maneuver, but, taking into account both of his character and the circumstances, is to assume that the whole issue should be discussed and possibly resolved in 24 hours. In this hypothesis it – can you say-in any case, impress some dissonances. First of all, the problem of supplies. Decisive importance and era, saw that there was little hope about the possibility of influx from the rear of supplies and, in particular, the timely appointment with the various divisions, became almost a must capture and utilize advanced logistics centers definitely prepared by the enemy. Yet, aside from the very little information about it-you knew generally that in the area of fort Magdalene were organs of the 8th Army, but nothing exactly pitched deposits-it does not appear that the logistical aspect of the episode has worried Rommel much. South of the Trigh el Abd had been planted by the enemy field depots No. 65, 62 and 63, a short distance from Gabr Saleh, and another, no. 50, was at about ten kilometers southeast of Gasr el-Abd. You know the painful amazement of von Ravenstein and Bayerlein when subsequently learned of the existence of such logistics centers in each of the extension which was about nine square kilometers: “*If we had known of those deposits, we could win the battle*”⁽¹⁰⁾.

The second consideration concerns the *Afrikakorps*. Was appallingly interspersed; high-ranking commanders traveling

almost alone, without even a escort worthy of the name, in the middle of the mixed up units friends and enemies seemed inextricable; advanced commands were struggling to keep their crops a few means and to take the reins of the difficult radio broadcasts, but none of this seemed to weigh on operating vision of Rommel. The third point concerns the large Italian units. About the *Savona*, it is amazing that it took place only one German attempt to get in touch with. Gen. De Giorgis to be sure about the real situation in the Sidi Omar-Campbell. As for the Corps of Maneuver, was experiencing a state of extremely unpleasant things and a harbinger of problems of operational nature. Partly for the double task of Gambarà, partly due to the habit of Rommel to give orders to the individual divisions, the Corps felt slip away from harmonics and coordinated conduct of the action. On the afternoon of the 24th the divisions were divided and with serious difficulties of links ⁽¹¹⁾.

You do not want to criticize excessive insistence of Rommel's command: it is more than obvious that he sought all about map for the speed and surprise. Then, satisfied with knowingly using the heads of columns: the rest was surrounded after, in support of the moral effect and the results initially plucked from materials from the few unabashedly pushed forward elements. Moreover, even Napoleon in many campaigns had played the same cards at a profit. With everything Crüwell remained baffled. Having no contact with. *Ariete* and *Trieste*, which however were very definitely back, suggested another project that is based on the German maneuver forces only: the 21st *Panzer* could arrive at Halfaya pass, descend on the coastal strip, climb up to High Sollum and fort Campbell from the east. The 15th *Panzer* would for its part tightened the opponent against the defences of the *Savona*, then eliminate it without much difficulty. "*This proposal was not accepted*" it reads on the war diary of the *Afrikakorps*.

Crüwell set to issue the orders according to the thought of Rommel. The 15th *Panzerdivision* was still near Gabr Saleh, where at 16:00 had suffered an attack of British armored vehicles withdrawing southward and, shortly after, a second attack, this time from the North-East. In addition had suffered an air raid. The troubles were

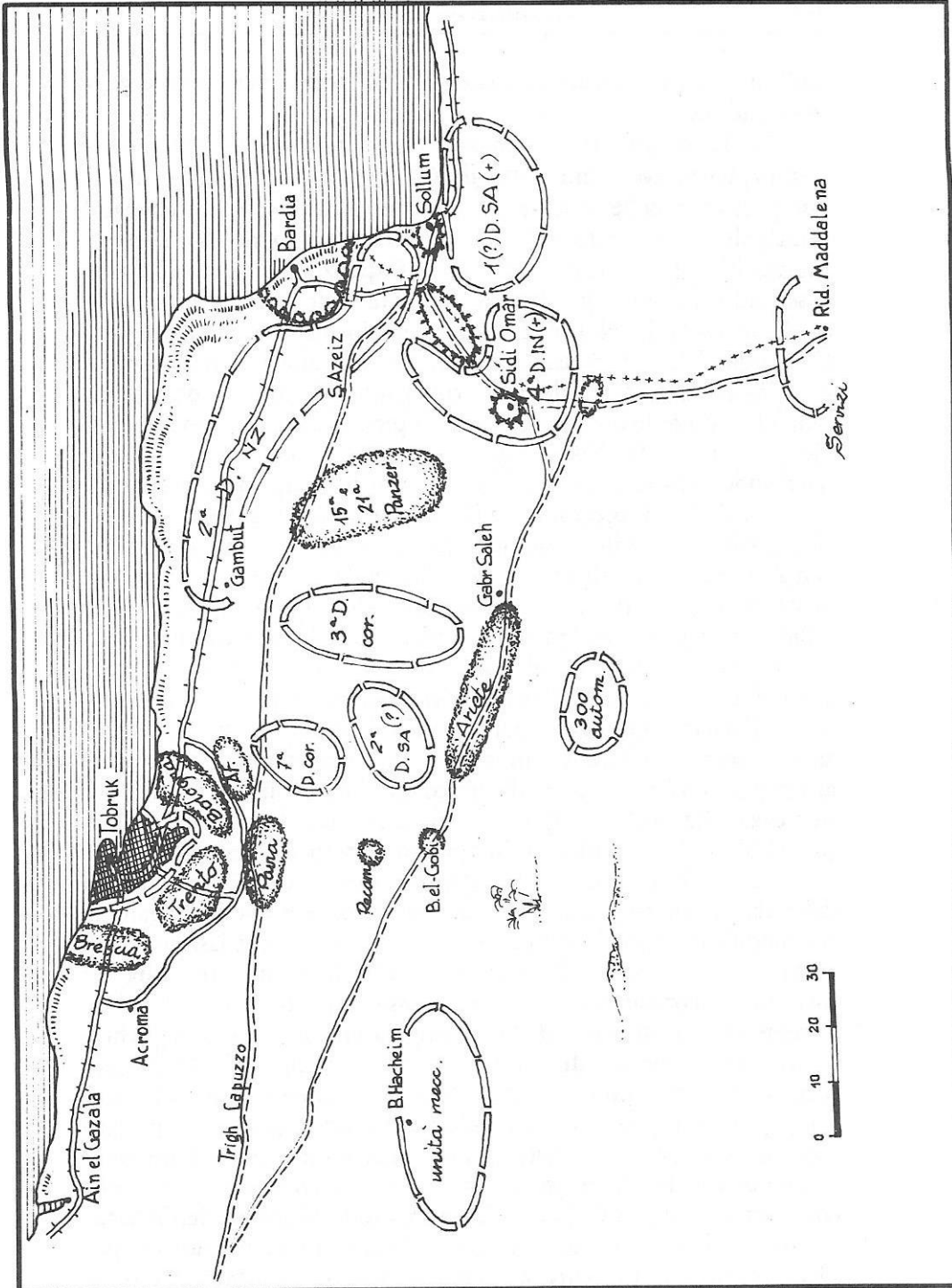
those of the 33rd Recon Group: lost the latest armored cars, and left without fuel, could not proceed immediately on Bir Habata. The 21st *Panzer* had the Knabe Group in action against elements of the 4th Indian Division and the rest to the rear, still diluted on about forty kilometres. Crüwell ordered Neumann-Silkow to hurry with the 15th *Panzer* to the border and himself, with a small escort, began looking for von Ravenstein. When in the desert South of Halfaya, ordered him to concentrate as they could of the 21st *Panzer* East of the wire and attacking at dawn, pushing the enemy on minefields. A part of 15th *Panzer* would act similarly to the East of the border, while the remainder of the Division and the *Ariete* would have prevented the 4th Indian Division to escape to the South and West.

At about 19:00, Crüwell returned to Gasr el-Abd with Bayerlein and along the way to chance could take on Rommel and Gause, remained left with out transport in the desert. Evidently the fate was favorable. Arrived at the wire, it was not possible to trace the hole and eventually must be standing all night in Egyptian territory. Well, the “Mammoth”, the main means of booty were bestowed on military commanders and the chiefs of staff of the *Panzergruppe* and of the *Afrikakorps's*, was ignored by bikers, tanks and enemy vehicles that were passing near or direct from fort Maddalena, just a few kilometers further South ⁽¹²⁾.

On the evening of the 24th of the axis forces was more or less as follows. The 15th *Panzer* (with 16 Pzkw II, 34 Pzkw III and 6Pzkw IV) was gathering slowly Northwest of Gasr el-Abd; the 21st *Panzer* (with 4 Pzkw II, 15 Pzkw III and 1 Pzkw IV and a command tank) was moving across borders, between Bir Sheferzen and Sidi Suleiman; the *Ariete* was collected North of el-Taieb Examp; the *Trieste* had moved with most of the troops in the area of el-Adem and the recon grouping was about twenty kilometers north of Bir el Gobi. As we have seen, no command had a working knowledge of where they had their own unit. Unless the Comando Superiore A.S., whose office operations at the end of the day reported on an alleged enemy and friendly situation than trusted, in practice, only had the device around Tobruk (sketch No. 57). These enormous difficulties of knowing things as they really were, in order to outline a correct operational plan, lay out the weight more than once, the “*decisive nose*” of Rommel. There is no doubt that in war we need to be cautious on relying offered

PRESUNTA SITUAZIONE BRITANNICA ALLA SERA DEL 24 NOVEMBRE
secondo il Comando Superiore A.S.

Schizzo n. 57



by intuition, but it is also true that on the whole it often becomes irreplaceable.

If the troops of the *Afrikakorps* arrived exhausted over the border without having annihilated 30 Corps, the upheaval they caused in the British backline was too severe. Main commands and arrears of 30 Corps were lost in the stream of fugitives, the first wound on the Trigh Capuzzo, near Sidi Azeiz; the second stopped across borders, thirty kilometers southeast of Gasr el-Abd. With a small but dedicated following Norrie joined the command of the 7th Armored Division, from which he did take a radio to resume connection with Cunningham. When the evening shadows descend the small column, with Gott in the front and Norrie with the tail, headed south of the Trigh el Abd, slipping unnoticed among German groups moving or parked. Furthermore the hasty ebb eastward and southward had repercussions even in sensitive terrestrial air force organization supporting the 8th Army. All landing strips used after the 19 November-namely, those of Gabr Saleh and Sidi Azeiz tactical reconnaissance and those near the fort Magdalen for the reduced eight fighter groups were abandoned due to the obvious danger. Of course the withdrawal of air forces was made whole by the urgency of the measure and on more than one occasion the old landing strip or new was jammed beyond safety limit. But even in this case, the lack of information from the German-Italian was an unannounced gift for the enemy.

While the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* ran to Gasr el-Abd describing a large semi-circle, the situation behind him had changed. As we know, the 23rd Freyberg had left the 5th Brigade in the Sidi Azeiz area and with the rest of the 2nd New Zealand Division had moved towards Sidi Rezegh ⁽¹³⁾, in support of the 6th Brigade that was gathering around to hill 175. At mid-afternoon the 4th Brigade (Gen. L.M. Inglis) had occupied Gambut, easily surpassing a small tactical German complex. As Crüwell had passed alongside the British field depots extended without even assume, so Freyberg ignored for an entire week just a few kilometers north of Gambut were the defensive services of the *Afrikakorps* in and -the best of war booty - repair shops for armored vehicles. In part this was due to the randomness of fortunes of war and the difficulties presented by desert terrain,

but it was in part caused by an explicit directive of Godwin-Austen. Fearing that New Zealanders fanned out, the Commander of the 13 Corp had stated not to operate North of the via Balbia. So, at the end of the 23rd the entire column of Freyberg had installed at Gambut and Bir el Chleta-neglecting completely the coastal strip.

On the morning of 24 November, Gen. Barrowclough heard via radio by the command of the Division that the 4th infantry brigade and 1st tank Brigade (Gen. H.R. Watkins) were twenty kilometers and were progressing towards Zaafran, and almost simultaneously learned from Gen. Scott-Cockburn that in 22nd Armored brigade was getting ready to protect the left flank and rear. So he decided to reiterate the effort to occupy entirely hill 175. This time the attempt was given to the 24th battalion, but met the same fate suffered by the 25th battalion the day before. The strong point of the Defense rested on the Wadi of Rugbet en-Nbeidat, deep and rugged, and even more positions to the West-nicknamed the *blockhouse*-who beat. Barrowclough is resigned to wait for reinforcements and Inglis ordered the 21st battalion to reach hill 175 shortly after noon, but things get complicated. The presence of a German Training Unit on a rise between the two New Zealand brigades called the feeling of a threat or an obstacle to be removed and sent to Inglis the 20th battalion with a squadron of *Valentine*. It was not a long nor difficult because the Germans soon left the position, but were lost seven tanks. In time with the rest of the column you have to support one of what was considered a powerful motorized group, sighted Northwest. The new danger disappeared soon since it was *Afrikakorps* -supplies not recognized either as such-but had been spent a lot of valuable time. Finally the 4th Brigade again in march and in the evening he passes ed-Dbana. Freyberg summoned then the commanders to report and determined that at the dawn of the 25th Barrowclough would surpass the Wadi of Rugbet en-Nbeidat and conquered the *blockhouse* while Inglis and Watkins, Zaafran arrived, they brought on the Trigh Capuzzo, taking contact with the 6th brigade. Around midnight Freyberg told by radio to Godwin-Austen: “(...) *If we had gasoline and ammunition we might hope to be at Tobruk early tomorrow. In such circumstances, we hope to get there for*

tomorrow night, but it is impossible to make accurate predictions”⁽¹⁴⁾. He was convinced that his Division and the siege circle of Tobruk there were other obstacles.

2. THE SITUATION ON THE FRONT OF SIDI OMAR-SOLLUM AND IN THE SAHARA.

After the operation *Battleaxe* the device at the border had changed in relation to the influx of new units and on the basis of precise indications of Rommel. In mid-November, on the eve of *Crusader*, defensive organization embraced the Bardia- Sollum -Halfaya and the *Savona* Division (sketch No. 58).

The first was employed by a German command held by Gen. Arthur Schmitt⁽¹⁵⁾ and included (sketch No. 59).

-the fort of Bardia (Col. Carlo Pierucci), manned by: II/15th infantry and II/16th *Savona* infantry, III/40th infantry of *Bologna*, IV squadrons Group *Genova*, XXVIII sector of the border guard, and 282nd and 342nd Group from border guard position, two batteries of the R. Navy, two small German training battalions of the army unit of Italian and British recovery;

-the strongpoint of the Halfaya (Maj. Wilhelm Bach), the substantive positions of the Halfaya pass and Lower Sollum. It was manned by the I/104th infantry 21st *Panzerdivision*, the 10th OASIS company (located in Lower Sollum), the III/2nd rapid artillery, a group of Italian formation of 105/28, a 155 (French war booty material), three pieces from 88 and three from 75/46;

-the strongpoint Faltenbacher: a reinforced company from three pieces of 88, three of 75/46, other cannons of recovery and some guns of 20.

All principals used many weapons recovered on the battlefield: submachine guns and machine guns, artillery pieces of small arms (used with anti-tank function) and medium caliber; Matilda turrets. And by specifying that the machine guns were recovered in almost all Schwarzlose, which the 47/32 and 65/17 lacked pointing devices and that, generally, the performance of weapons in question-left much to be desired because of the poor condition of use. In particular, the fort of Bardia had the following material:

Arms	of equipment	of recovery	total
submachine guns	78	18	96
machine guns	99	90	189
Anti-tank rifles	-	11	11
20 mm Guns	4	-	4
gun of 47/32	22	13	35
gun of 65/ 17	-	25	25
gun of 77/28	-	4	4
Mortar of 81 mm	6	-	6
gun of 75/27	12	2	14
gun of 76/40	2	-	2
gun of 77/28	12	4	16
gun of 105/28	-	7	7
gun of 120/45	2	-	2

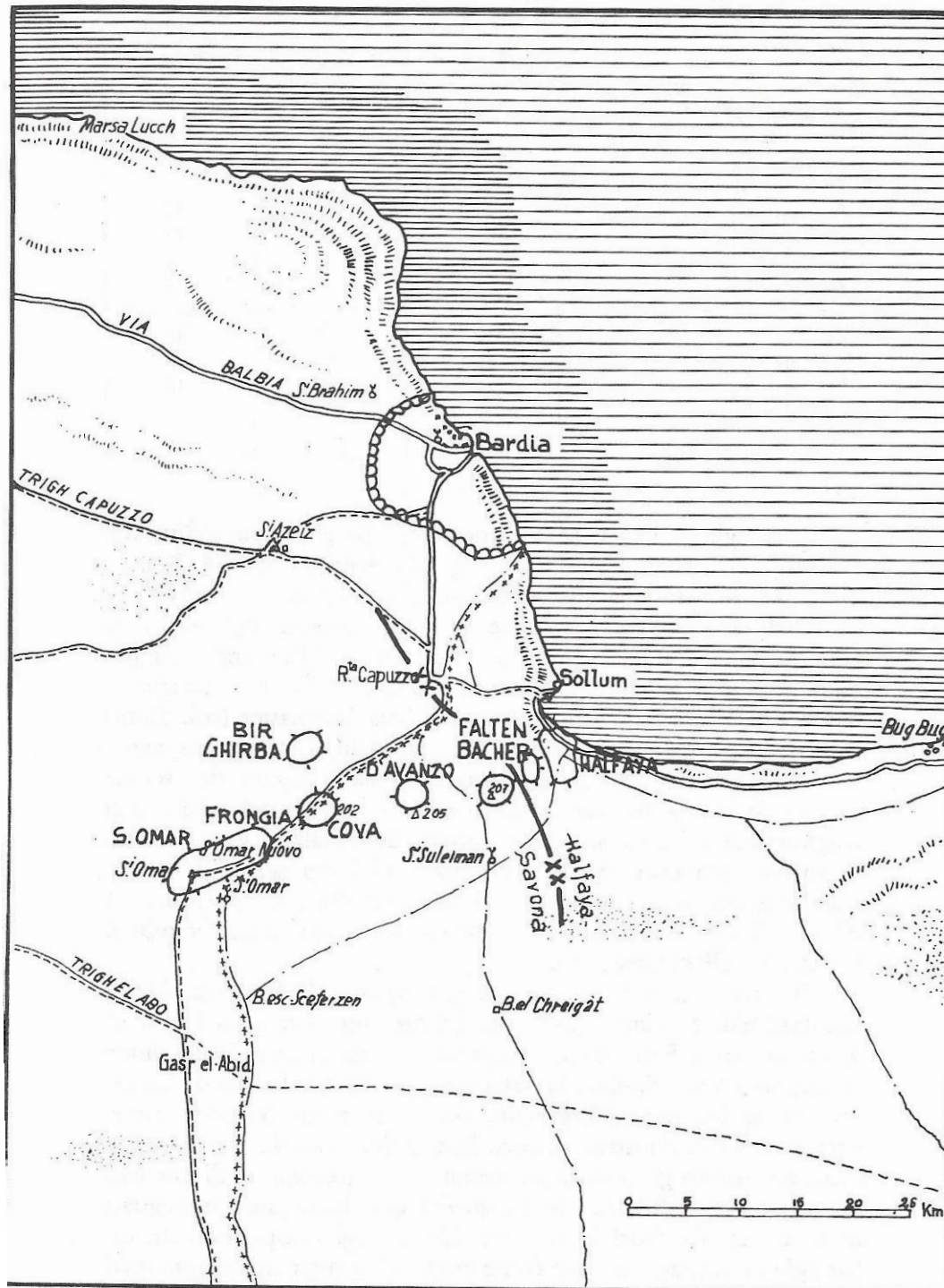
The artillery of recovery were serviced by staff transferred from the 2nd rapid artillery and 12th *Savona's* artillery. At Bardia, in addition, there were several control elements and services: command of the *Afrikakorps*, but will move near Gambut just started the British offensive; German artillery command of the sector, represented by the 2nd quick artillery Command (Col. Grati); the engineers of the *Marmarica* (Col. Lami) with four companies of various specialties and three companies workers; a Intendenza Office with some organs of the Italian services; the Basic Command of *Savona* with regimental staff and most of the Divisional services; the port Command with elements of the R. Navy; German services unit. Altogether, as of 18 November, there were about 3,500 Italians in Bardia and 1,500 Germans (not considered under the command of the *Afrikakorps*).

The area of *Savona* was the most exposed. The fort Campbell-Sidi Suleiman line (limit of the field with the German strongholds) went up at Sidi Omar, including (sketch No. 60). The Division had arrived from Tripolitania in the second half of July. Was well cleared the environment because one-third of the staff was in Libya for nearly four years and two-thirds for over eighteen months against men felt the psychological burden of such a long absence from Italy. In place of the two battalions engaged in the defense of Bardia, Gen. De Giorgis had a machine-gun battalion, a company of Assault Infantry, a light tank company

The front of Sidi Omar-Halfaya

IL FRONTE SIDI OMAR-HALFAYA

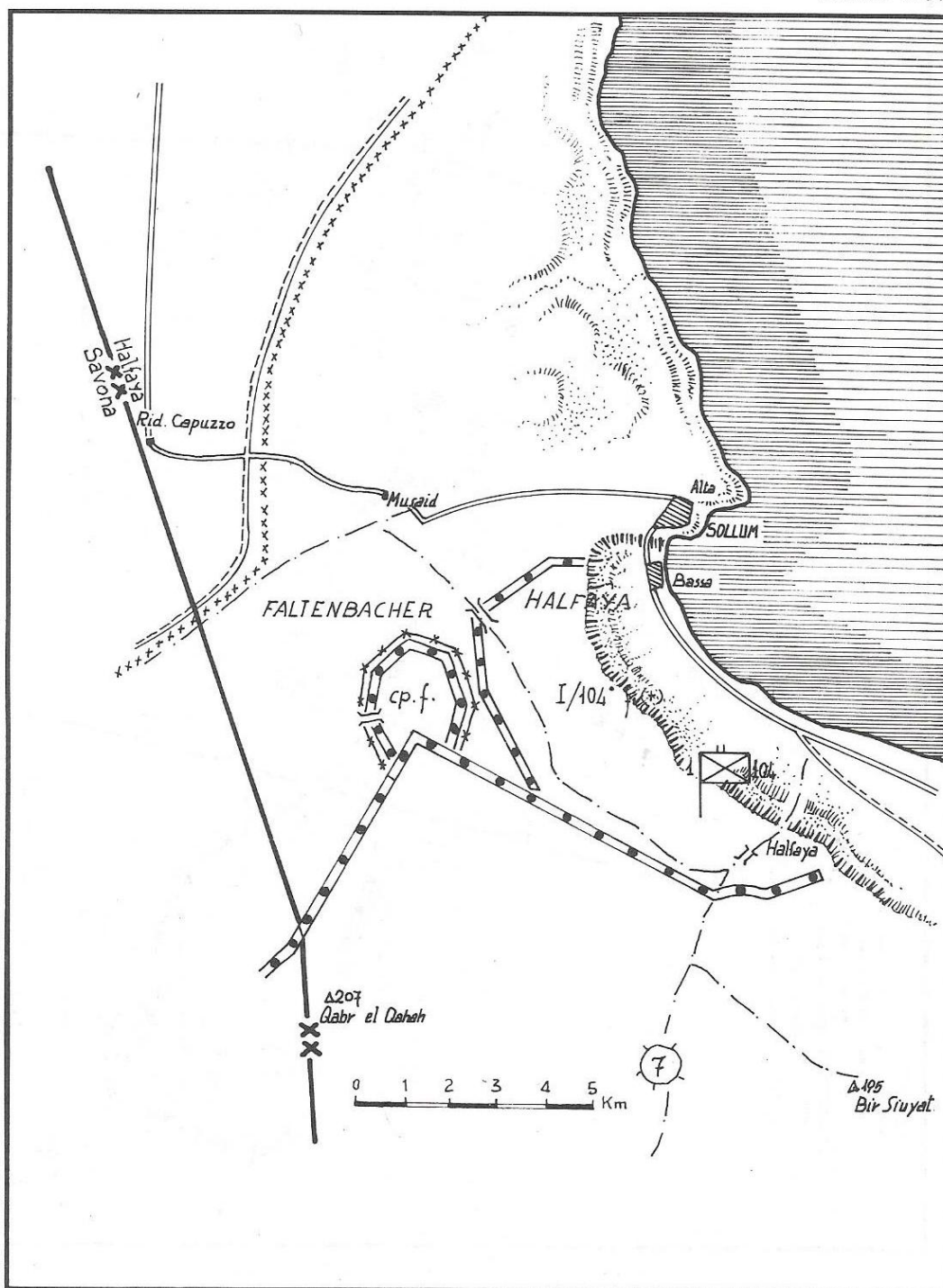
Schizzo n. 58



The Halfaya Area

IL SETTORE DELL'HALFAYA

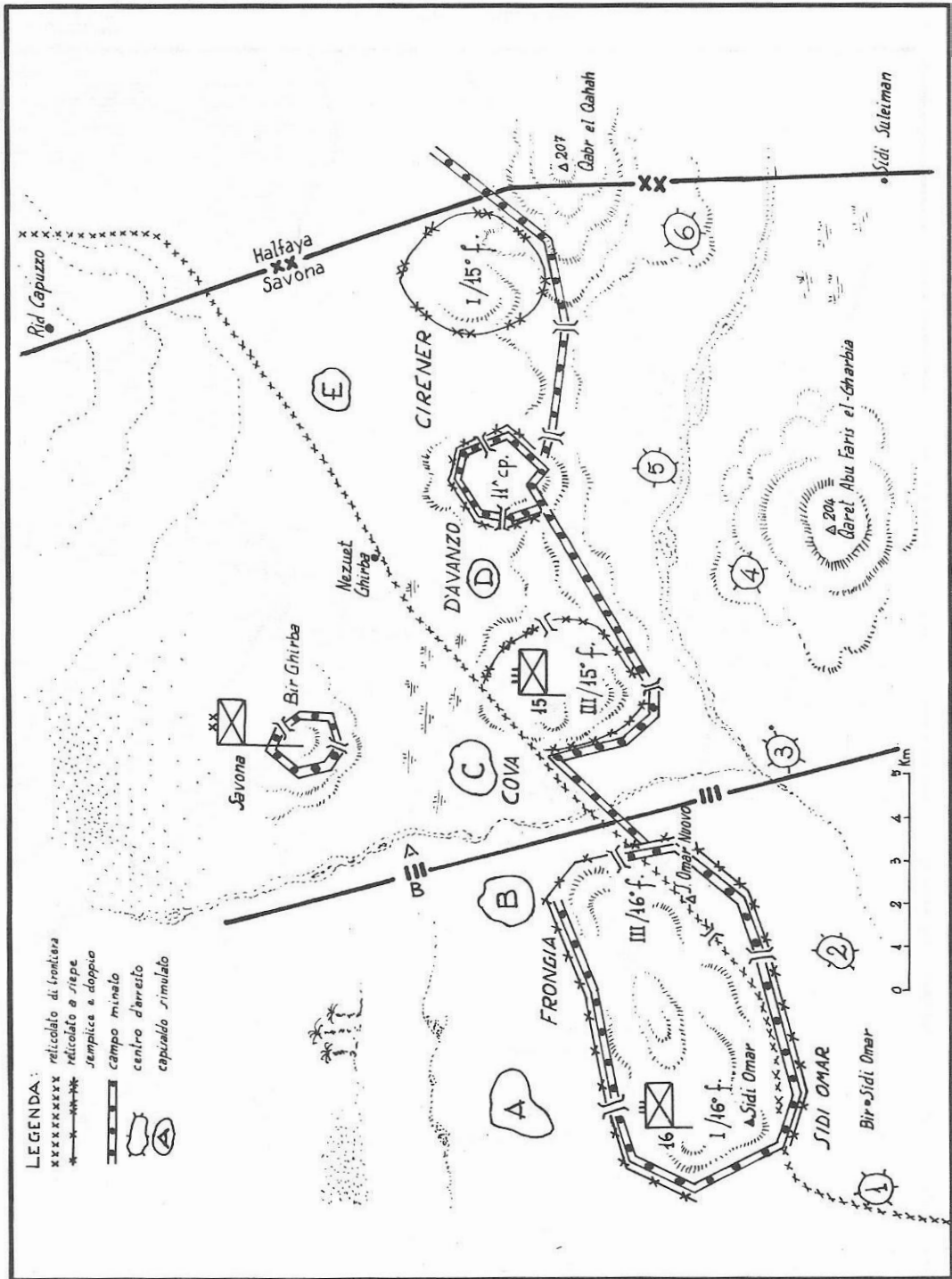
Schizzo n. 59



The Savona Division Area

IL SETTORE DELLA DIVISIONE SAVONA

Schizzo n. 60



and three German OASIS companies. The Italian sector, about 30 kilometers wide, is distributed into two regimental sectors: (A), held by 15th infantry, and (B) assigned to the 16th infantry. The first (Col. Rossi) was based on three pillars, all across the border:

Cirener: garrisoned by I/15th infantry reinforced, II/2th rapid artillery, 2nd company OASIS, a mortar platoon from 81;

D'Avanzo: 11th reinforced company;

Cova: 15th infantry Command, III/15th infantry (minus the 11th company) reinforced, 13th OASIS company, a company of 81 mortars, a 65/17.

The sector B (Col. Francesco Aveta), who received greater availability of forces and means because without a flank support, consisted of two mainstays, unlike the previous method within a single perimeter of minefield belt and wire:

Frongia: III/16th reinforced infantry, II/12th artillery (with two batteries of 75/27), one battery of 65/17, one battery of 20, one battery of 88, a battery company Assault Infantry;

Sidi Omar: 16th infantry Command, I/16th infantry reinforced, III/12th, two artillery batteries of 105/28, one of 65/17, one of 88, 12th OASIS company and a company Assault Infantry.

The cornerstones of battalion aligned in strong points, by the company and these centers of resistance of platoon. Essentially a linear defensive strongpoints, with possibility of fire reaction on 360°, but without any way to dynamically respond to crush infiltration and, worse, penetration. Before the static structures, a couple of kilometers, had been made some “centers of arrest”: one in the Halfaya field, four in that of 15th infantry and two in that of 16th infantry, with the aim of breaking the enemy attack, disoriented and worn out ⁽¹⁶⁾. On the reverse, however, had proceeded to the creation of simulated strongholds. Always overleaf, Bir Ghirba, more or less in the center of the Divisional, sector command of the *Savona* was held in isolated stronghold, with an assault company, the light tanks, a engineers, a section of 100/17 and a pair of Matilda turrets with its gun.

The task assigned to the *Savona* was to attach to your opponent and wear out positions for the time taken to *Panzer* Divisions to act counter-offensively. Rommel believed that this would not have been time for more than 48 hours. Apart from this, each facility must defend to the bitter end. The

logistic autonomy level amounted to five days of food and water, and dry 3-5 units of fire for ammunition. The November 15 Crüwell had visited the area and took note of some important deficiencies represented by De Giorgis: absence of means for an effective movement reaction (light tanks company had tanks in poor condition and, famously, its weight was negligible); numeric richness of artillery but strong attrition of material (a good half of the guns had been recovered on the battlefield and in returned to order at best); particular delicacy of the extreme right not supported for divisional a naturally strong position; insecurity communication line with Bardia, the sole source of supplies and vacate; vulnerability of the defensive line to the Northwest, resulting from the lack of accommodation fort Campbell, Bir Musaid and High Sollum (the dominant lower Sollum landing, subsidiary of Bardia and unique water center after the fort); incongruity of existence of the stronghold of Bir Ghirba, completely isolated. Of course things remained as they were, partly because Rommel thought to Tobruk and partly because he was convinced that the enemy would attack in the same form used in the operation *Battleaxe*. In such cases, the intervention of the *Afrikakorps* from Gambut would be timely for the purposes of the winding and the striker mass annihilation.

The November 17 on Gen. De Giorgis went to Bardia, in command of the *Afrikakorps*. Crüwell was absent, so he spoke with Bayerlein and Rommel's plan confirmation in the event that a British offensive had preceded the art minded new Italian-German attempt against Tobruk: “*draw enemy forces to the Gambut area, batteries and throw back to smash them against the positions of the frontier*“⁽¹⁷⁾. Meanwhile had already predicted that when the command of DAK had moved, the two defensive sectors of the border would be moved to directly under the *Panzergruppe*, continuing *Savona's* to hold his liaison with the Comando Superiore A.S. The 18th began first reports of movements South of Bir Sheferzen (it was the 7th Indian Brigade and 44th *Royal Tanks*), then there were some framing shots from the opposing side, then to capture 20 driver's of the 4th Indian Division. Of course, any uncertainty could still be dropped immediately. Yet the 19th and 20th passed without events of particular significance: artillery shelling, air raid, some movements across the front

East (was the *Central India Horse*) and South of Bir Sheferzen (the 2nd New Zealand Division), reconnaissance activities everywhere.

In the late morning of the 21st observers found an intense movement of armored and motorized transport towards the North-East and shortly afterwards the stronghold of Sidi Omar fell under an intense artillery bombardment, which lasted a couple of hours. Towards evening the capture of an Indian patrol allowed him to find, among other documents, some aerial photographs of the southern strongholds of the *Savona*: now the attack was imminent.

That day the 2nd New Zealand Division had begun its march northward, passing Trigh el Abd at noon. In the late afternoon the vanguard, consisting of a squadron of cavalry, reached Sidi Azeiz and went into obscurity until the via Balbia. There was a clear idea of what could be behind the Italian-German lineup, as well, as you can't see the absence of mobile units, Freyberg on the night were to collect the entire Division. The tasks entrusted to the brigades had already been previously defined: the 5th had to focus on fort Capuzzo, Bir Musaid and high Sollum; the 4th occupied firmly the dominant Bardia Ridge and the via Balbia; the 6th remained in reserve, ready to move westward. At the dawn of the 22nd the 23rd battalion of the Fifth Brigade sailed with a squadron of *Valentine* to Campbell, planning to set up a real attack. There was no need because in the ruins of the Fort stood only a section from 105 that, obviously, was quickly overwhelmed. It was then a clear the error represented by failure to defend that position, because it allowed the Kiwis to establish themselves in a very important and central point for communications with Bardia. The telephone connections were disrupted and also was the aqueduct between Bardia and Sollum. At the same time the 4th Brigade approached the fort, capturing some Italians and Germans, and the 6th Brigade was at Bir el Hariga, an hour before Cunningham sent the order to turn on Bir el-Chleta.

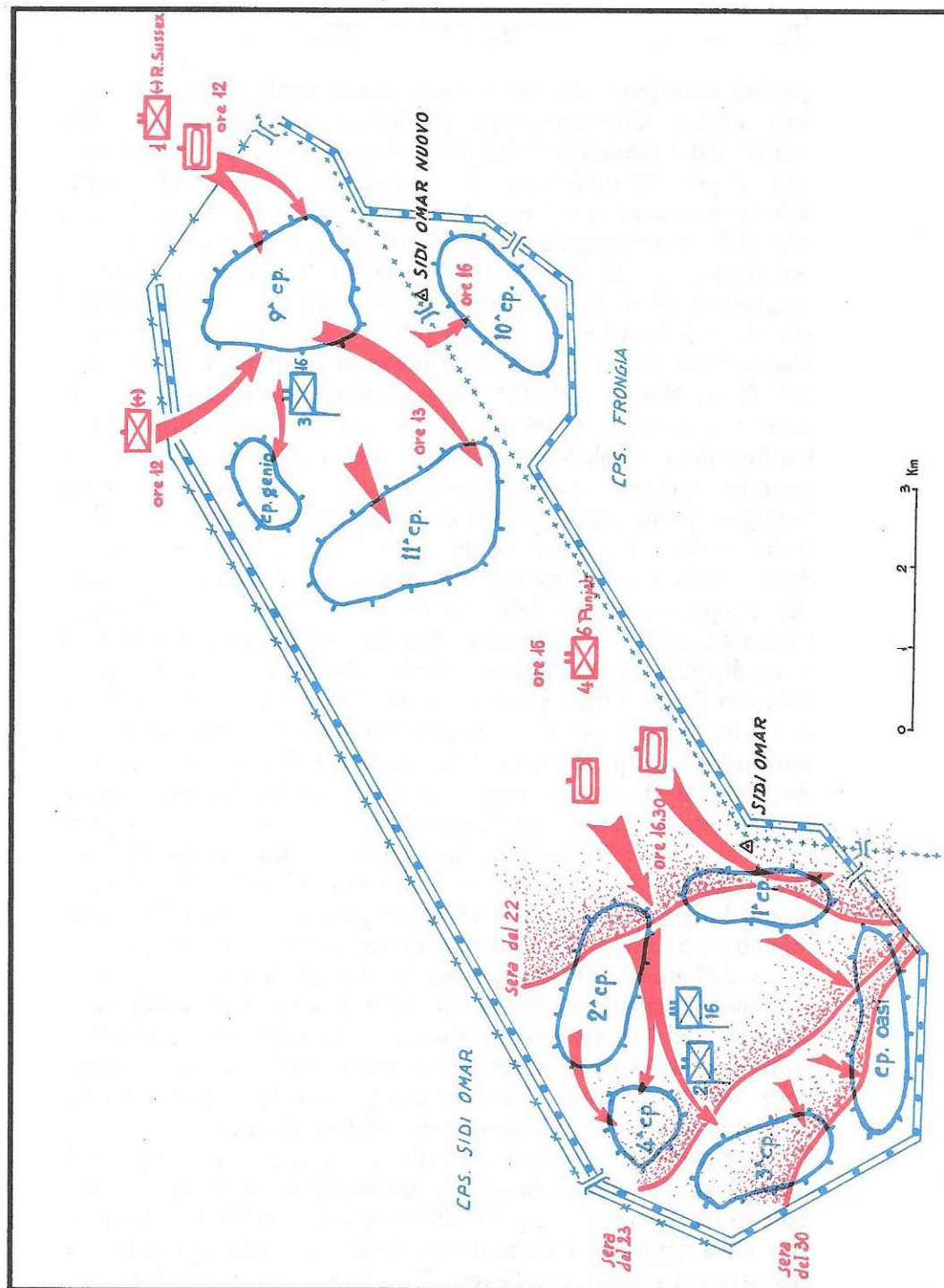
The garrison at Bardia were now waiting for the attack and the 4th Brigade showed up right away. At 10:30 a patrol get closer to the sector of the II/16th infantry: greeted by the fire of automatic weapons stationed himself well suited. On the basis of the information obtained, shortly before noon the opponent made an attempt of greater consistency, but this too, promptly work countering the intervention of artillery, was empty. In the afternoon, at 16:30, a

further effort exercised on two separate tracts, also in the sector of II/16th infantry, with the infantry on the one hand and tanks on the other, it was rebuffed. At dusk the Brigade refused to back off permanently.

Further South, in the same afternoon of the 22nd, New Zealand exploration had identified the area of Bir Ghirba a “*concentration of enemy vehicles*” and 21st battalion was given the task of taking care of the matter. But, unlike fort Capuzzo, Bir Ghirba—although quite isolated and disconnected from a defensive system—was occupied in defense. The battalion came up to a hundred feet or so from the perimeter of the strongpoint in full tranquility, much to be followed at a short distance from the trucks. Security was given, of course, from previous artillery shots fed, by the absence of Italian from counter-battery from fire intensity battery support friends and by the silence of arms of Defense (they had orders to shoot only at short distances). So New Zealanders despite an unexpected violent reaction of fire, which caused them heavy losses and forced them to fall back with the favor of the night, under the protection of their artillery.

Meanwhile, the 7th Indian Brigade (Gen. H.R. Briggs) ⁽¹⁸⁾, supported by two field artillery regiments and by two medium caliber batteries, it was going to attack the strongpoint behind Frongia and Sidi Omar (sketch No. 61). Tactical reports data that exist between them with the aerial photography and reconnaissance a defensive structure, though two distinct substantive positions, the Briggs design aimed to break the perimeter at the crust against the throat of a single constituent element, Frongia, and then proceed to the Interior of the structure against Sidi Omar, taking advantage of the absence of passive obstruction. At 11:00 of the 23rd began a disastrous fire of preparation, particularly focused on Sidi Omar, then after half an hour, moved on the positions of Sidi Omar again. More or less simultaneously took place three air strikes on both strongholds led by formations of three units (one of which was demolished). The damage suffered by 16th infantry was sensitive, not so much for the human loss, very reduced due to excavation works, because the materials affected, telephone communications disrupted even within the strongholds, many devastated areas, some 88 and 105 pieces hit.

As soon as the thinning out curtain produced by the use of



smoke grenades, in front of the north side of the 9th company appeared a squadron of *Matilda* from 42nd *Royal Tanks* followed by the battalion of the *Royal Sussex*. The minefield (just two lines deep) was exceeded by momentum and had a brief but fierce battle. Enveloped from the North-East and North-West, at 13:00 the 9th company was overwhelmed; then it was the turn of the 11th company, whose front throat resisted half an hour. At 14:00 remained the cornerstone of the 10th company, located beyond the border wire. At this point took a short break. While the British effort was forced to stop in the ruins of Sidi Omar again, the IV/6th *Punjab*, reinforced by two tank squadrons, climb over the first echelon and moved against the northeast side of the stronghold of Sidi Omar, entirely exposed to the offense. The second phase was to overcome three or four hundred meters of land discovered by following a direction now clearly identified. In addition, the fall of the “Frongia” had been seen in his dramatic phases and in the sad epilogue; It's no coincidence the *Sussex* had paraded the captives on the edge of the relief where previously had located the command of the III/16th and had raised vertically cannons of 88 pieces and hoisted the white drapes were captured. Thus the defenders of Sidi Omar were awaiting the Indian advance. At 15:30, after a new fire of 20 minutes, it was the turn a Squadron of the 44th *Royal Tanks*. Advancing in line, at a speed of 25-30 kilometers per hour. Inevitably fell under the fire of 88 pieces and 105 and lost in a matter of minutes most of his fourteen *Matilda*. That of 42nd, which followed, it tried to oblique to the left, slid down the front of the 1st company and ended up against the outer minefield, losing some tanks, also. The non happy beginning of attack was also due to the disconnect between tanks and infantry. Arriving at the scene the *Punjab*, the effort managed to hack-about the strong points of 1st and 2nd company, whose commanders had fallen wounded, and to settle at dusk on a line that cut one-third of these structures. Meanwhile, between 16:00 and 17:00, the last stronghold of Sidi Omar Nuovo ceased resistance.

For several hours the command of the Division was left without contacts with higher commands with Bardia and the majority of employees, since the interruption of telephone lines had to be added to the traits of radio communications. Of what was happening in the West, De Giorgis could simply suspecting something for comparison. Previously, from Bir Ghirba

had witnessed some regularity of movement from the South to the Northwest, “*but already since morning of the 24th appeared irregular movements to this sign-said-to give the impression of a confusion, a confusion between motorized columns that fell back to the South; while others moved in the opposite direction. Meanwhile, vehicles, completely disoriented, stragglers roamed in the area adjacent to the Bir Ghirba stronghold in the West and Southwest and there were easily caught with all their cargo*”⁽¹⁹⁾.

The links were made late at night and the situation clarified. To a Comando Superiore A.S. message that announced imminent, the planned maneuver of the *Afrikakorps* towards the border, De Giorgis said that the stronghold of Bir Ghirba hadn't, at least for the time being, need help and that, instead, it appeared advisable and urgent German intervention in favor of Sidi Omar.

Here everyone knew to have hours counted. Over night, the Commander of I/16th provided to reorder the units and to bind in any way the gap opened on the northeast side. At the dawn of the 23rd the Indian action resumed, but not until late afternoon assumed the physiognomy of systematic attack. It was a succession of actions short of fire-concentrations of artillery and mortars, especially on the reverse of the position, pinning big combat patrols, raids of armored cars. The tanks are kept at a distance, confining itself to shelling from time to time when the defenders. The tactic of crumbling adopted was slow but profitable: between midday and 16:00 fell individual fire centers, the company of the battalion command, then that of 16th infantry. At 17:00, after a short preparation, the IV/6th *Punjab* made a tight effort, stopping only at the last two strong points-3rd company and German-OASIS company that will remain standing until 30 November⁽²⁰⁾. The fall of “Frangia” and much of “Sidi Omar” was a definite success for the opponent, even if you paid with 500 dead or wounded and 35 tanks out of action. Conquered by positions of the 7th Indian Brigade stepped up its offensive capability against “Bir Ghirba” and “Cova”, that in fact, ... that day they had to endure a pounding siege, and provided support to the columns towards Tobruk.

On 24 November behind the border defenses was under British control. The same command of the 4th Indian Division was brought North of Bir Ghirba and Gen. Messervy was

satisfied with how things were progressing. The 11th Brigade (Gen. A. Andersen) was still at the foot of the escarpment of Halfaya, on the plateau, to Sidi Omar Nuovo, the *Central India Horse* squadrons faced reinforced Axis positions without engaging much; the 7th Brigade had enveloped the strongholds of Sidi Omar and Bir Ghirba and sorting out for complete success. The 5th had not yet been involved in combat.

Freyberg had also to be pleased. The previous afternoon had walked towards Gambut the 4th New Zealand Brigade of Inglis and had left in place the only 5th Brigade of Hargest, but in practice Bardia was separated from defensive positions Sidi Omar-Halfaya. Hargest, which was passed under the orders of Messervy had three battalions. The 22nd, placed on the Ridge at about ten kilometers west of the square, the 23rd had possession of Musaid and fort Capuzzo and 28th (Maori), who the day before had occupied High Sollum. There was joined by a squadron of *Valentine* overwhelming the German defense of the barracks, after a first attempt failed due to the fire of the pieces of the Halfaya. The loot was good, because High Sollum was the basis of the German advance. Now Godwin-Austen, who had moved to Bir el Hariga, on Capuzzo, watched with smiling eye the prospects opened. The axis forces were divided into three isolated groups: Bardia, virtually frozen; the strongholds of Bir Ghirba, Halfaya and Cova surrounded by all parties; Sidi Omar, reduced to very little and it enveloped. Before moving to the stage of liquidation of parts, could devote himself to the difficult coordination of action of Freyberg with the sortie of Scobie and leave Messervy to further improve the situation on the border. He couldn't imagine that the *Afrikakorps* was rushing towards the Southeast as a cyclone.

In the Sahara the casework was obviously linked to the undertaking of the *Oasis Group* of Gen. Reid ⁽²¹⁾. That has gathered in mid November in the oasis of Siwa and Jaghub, the band also had the purpose of make believe at Comando Superiore A.S. that considerable armored force move from that basis, in order to induce him to divert troops to deal with the threat. In this regard, to enhance the sense of danger had been prepared two battalions of fake tanks. Also the *Oasis Group* should head towards Gialo both cause concern the interruption of communications in the South of the Gulf of Sirte, both to accomplish actually

nuisance raids. Within this framework were prepared two moves. A preliminary, it is already scarce, to arrange a landing strip (*Landing Ground* No. 125) in the middle of the desert about 200 kilometers from Giarabub, to stretch the arm of the *Western Desert Air Force*. The assignment was given to 7th South African reconnaissance battalion (Lt. Col. Grobbelaar) who, after a week of training South of el-Kattara depression, on 12 November headed westward, reinforced by a squadron of R.A.F. armored cars. The area chosen for the track was about fifty miles south of the head of the *Wadi el-Mra* (sketch No. 62). It was reached the next day. It was necessary to coordinate the second move now with the start of operation *Crusader*: a raid against a target of enemy's rear.

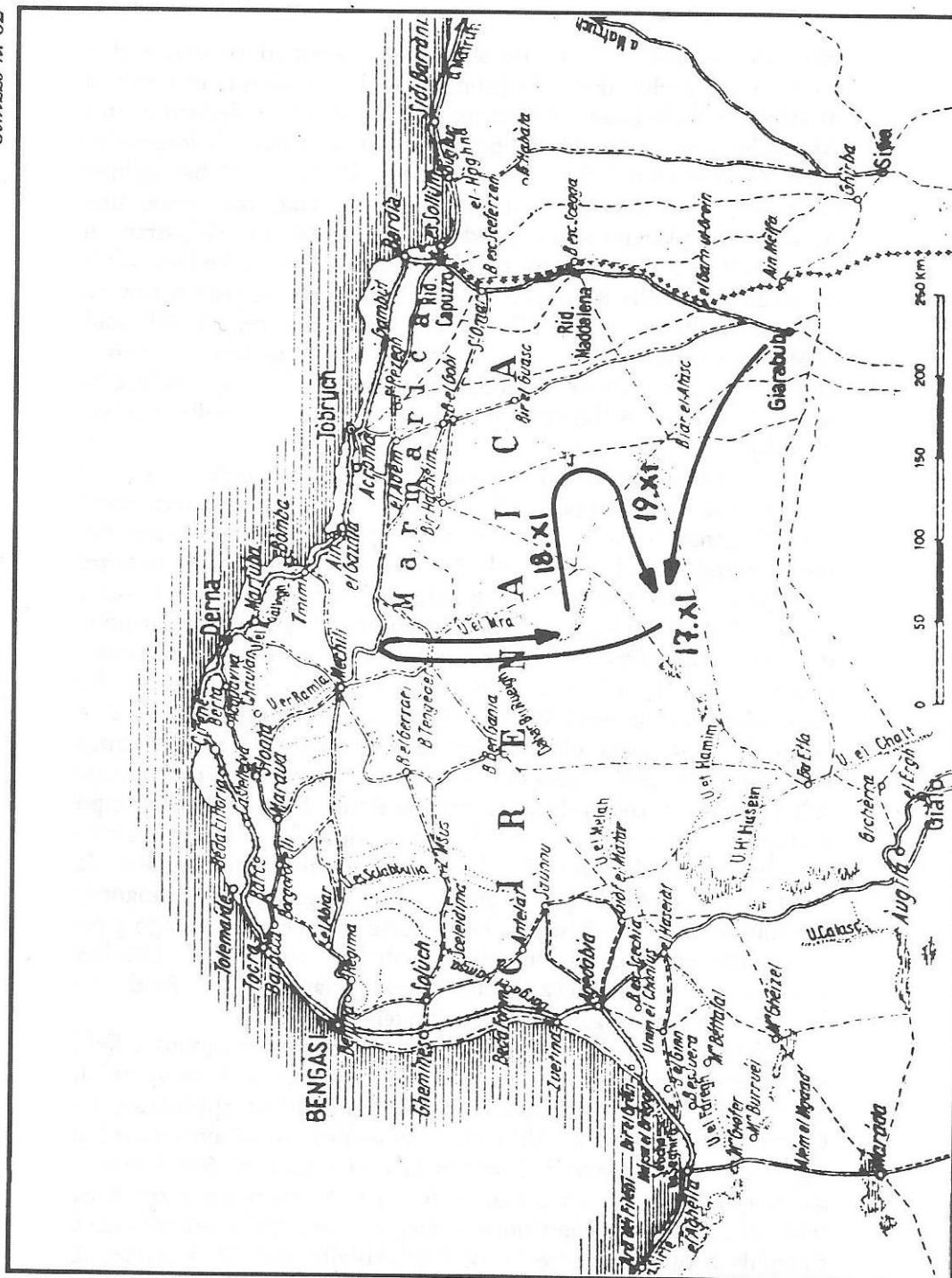
Final orders are sent by 8th Army Air Command, but a sandstorm and the temporary interruption of radio links meant that the unit bearing such orders were only at 08:00 of November 17. There was to choose between el-Mechili and Bir Hakeim. This was closer but carried by the intervention by units of the *Ariete*; Furthermore, the patrols of the *Long Range Desert Group* had warned the impassability of *Wadi el-Mra*'s from the South and West, so the Commander's decision fell on el-Mechili ⁽²²⁾. Between the *Landing Ground* 125 and ran over two hundred kilometers to cover before the dusk that same November 17, so that the RAID on the airport ended overnight. Given the limited time available (in relation to the desert land to be crossed) No wonder at nightfall the 7th reconnaissance battalion had just passed Bir Tengeder. It remained that to go back, which was making a wide turn. The afternoon of the 19th, Lt. Col. Grobbelaar returned to the *Landing Ground*, where-awaited him a message left by Gen. Reid, who invited him to join him in his march on Gialo.

In the task, very far-reaching, assigned to Reid was appearance to ensure security at the airports of luck that the *Western Desert Air Force* intended to prepare between Giarabub and Ajdabiya. At the last moment, on 16 November, joined the occupation of Gialo (sketch No. 63). Of course, the question was under consideration by a few weeks and since mid-October the strategic reconnaissance aircraft had been-photographing the town repeatedly. At dawn on the 18th, then,

The South African incursion in the rear axle (17-18 November)

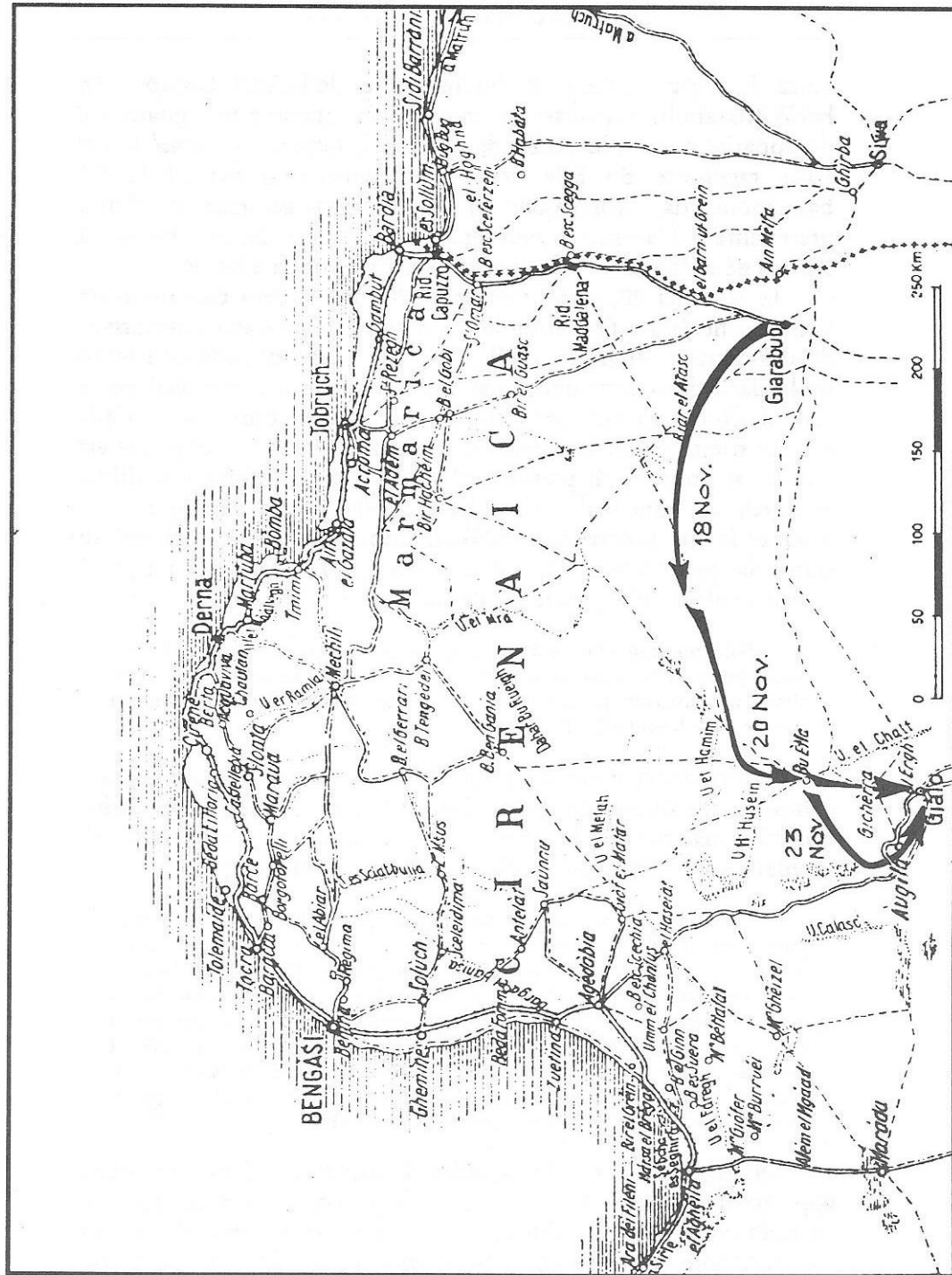
L'INCURSIONE SUDAFRICANA NELLE RETROVIE DELL'ASSE
(17-19 novembre)

Schizzo n. 62



LA SPEDIZIONE DELLA FORZA "E" CONTRO GIALO
(18-24 novembre)

Schizzo n. 63



Force E, represented by a large part of the *Oasis Group* ⁽²³⁾, left Giarabub. Divided into vanguard, and rearguard to look even deeper, overtook the *Landing Ground* 125 on the 19th and reached Bu Etla early in the afternoon of the 21st (the 7th reconnaissance battalion had met the previous day). The advance certainly wasn't unnoticed by either Bastico nor to Rommel and even had been neglected in Rome.

On the evening of the 20th, as we know t Rommel had communicated to Crüwell that 500 or 600 British armored cars were crossing the desert to Benghazi. Was alarmed, but not enough to be diverting from the focal point of the situation. On the other hand, the Comando Superiore for a detailed examination of the news had convinced be elements of the *Long Range Desert Group*, had to preside over Barce and then to reinforce the defense of Ajdabiya, and to hit by aviation the enemy column during its progression ⁽²⁴⁾. The Comando Supremo was immediately seized with concern: "*Be careful of port Benghazi*" telegraphed Cavallero the 21st, and the next day:

"British Bulletin speaks of columns pushed in all directions towards our vital points. Commutate your judgment on that assertion. It is also the desire of the Duce more precise details you have on column directed to Ajdabiya & note your actions". ⁽²⁵⁾.

Bastico had meanwhile learned that Reid had come to Bu Etla and understood that this was the goal, indeed probably the initial goal, but could make little and much more the pressed the events of Marmarica therefore replied:

"British Newsletters pursue their particular purpose trying to impress public opinion. Truth about ongoing actions resulting from our press releases. On column note I already given every possible news. It is constantly followed hammered by aviation and material losses. His situation is clear from the press release no. 01/19678 date 22 November. Not having mobile units capable of acting at long range measures already implemented consisted in strengthening with the few available forces places deemed as more likely targets. This column movements are constantly monitored but for the time being at least it does not concern". ⁽²⁶⁾.

Then ordered to the 5th Air Fleet to increase the number of aircraft located in Ajdabiya. If Rome stresses the potential danger of a RAID across the desert, the Comando Superiore certainly overestimated the ability aviation offense. However, in fact, as early as the morning of the 21st Italian aircraft

had strafed Force E all the day after other aircraft will carry on the sky of the column, the damage suffered by the Force E were very limited and not prevented to complete the mission.

At Bu Etla, Reid had materialized its plan. I expected a big resistance, also considered the limited consistency of the garrison, however decided to act from two directions. The main effort is in charge (Lieut. Col. Shon)- armored car Squadron, two companies of *Punjabis*, a campaign, an anti-tank and anti-aircraft section-had to first seize Augila, then proceed West on Gialo. The second column (Lieut.Col. Grobbelaar)- 7th Recon battalion, a company of *Punjabis*, an anti-tank and anti-aircraft section-was commissioned to implement demonstration action from the North, occupying Gicherra. At 11:00 of the 22nd the Short column reached Augila. After a short resistance to 12:30 the reduced garrison surrendered ⁽²⁷⁾. The other direction, the goal was touched at dusk, so the action against the Fort was delayed to the following morning. Gicherra fell at 11:00 of the 23rd ⁽²⁸⁾.

Now it was investing Gialo ⁽²⁹⁾. Reid resolved to move closer to the OASIS that same night and attack from the southwest at first light of the 24th. The first attempt to capture the redoubt of el-Ergh went for nothing due to intense open fire at point blank range by the defenders and a raid by four *Messerschmitt*. The second attempt, however, conducted by Indian infantry shortly before sunset, was crowned by the success and the garrison surrendered at 20:40 ⁽³⁰⁾. The following day were eliminated the other nodes of external resistance at blockhouse, some of whom resisted with decisive resolve, despite being closed the match.

Reaching Gialo had no significant weight on operations. Even as the OASIS fell into the hands of Reid, Auchinleck issuing the directive to use patrols of the *Long Range Desert Group* offensively against axis communication lines and small garrisons and, especially, to "*manage the Oasis Group as soon as possible against the coastal road to attest any traffic on it and, possibly, take Ajdabiya or Benina*". However, the *Long Range Desert Group* did not possess either the registration nor the training for complex action and Force E was blocked. Contrary to expectations, the loot into fuel and food had been well placed, which translated into the waiting for supplies through the *Landing Ground 125*.

3. THE FIGHTING AT THE BORDER (25-26 NOVEMBER).

On the morning of 25 November, Cunningham the revised situation in the light of the news come from aerial reconnaissance. The *Deutsches Afrikakorps* was collected in the area of Bir Sheferzen. Even without trying to guess the intentions of Rommel, was that they had interrupted the communications of 13 Corps, was indeed right on its axis of supplied and retreat, within walking distance of an airport in the *Western Desert Air Force* had concentrated, forcibly, all fighters, and less than 50 kilometers from the Advanced Command of the 8th Army. Not only that, but between the Germans and the British field depots as precious stood not that different units which you do not know the real combative capacity. Under these conditions, Cunningham resolved to convince Auchinleck to return to Cairo.

The Commander in Chief departed in flight after noon, leaving a message of the encouragement:

"During the three days spent at your Advanced Command I have seen and heard enough to persuade me, despite not having need, that the determination of your commanders and your troops to beat the enemy could not be greater, and I do not doubt that he will be defeated. Her situation is desperate and trying, sticking out in every direction, to distract us from our goal, which is to destroy him once and for all. Let us NOT distract ourselves and the enemy WILL BE destroyed. You have bitten. Bite more and don't let go of the grip until it is won. Do not give the truce. The general situation in AFRICA is excellent. There is only one order: ATTACK AND CHASE. Each commits to the bottom"⁽³¹⁾.

But Auchinleck was concerned-and seriously – on Cunningham's fitness to command the army during that difficult time, especially having observed the psychological difficulties of these to enter the order of ideas of an aggressive and offensive. At fort Magdalene he had talked with Air Mar. Tedder, is also very dubious, and when he arrived in Cairo the decision was taken: it was necessary to give a new head to the 8th Army. Here was another problem. Should be a General already oriented, but Norrie and Godwin-Austen had both enough trouble for thinking of using one of them to replace Cunningham: inevitably would be immediate-impact fate in the leadership of the Corps whose Commander had been chosen. The only available for character skills, knowledge of strategic and tactical situation and expectations

staff was General Ritchie. Unfavorable aspects of similar description were two. Ritchie was Vice Chief of staff of the command in Chief of the Middle East and, indeed, of degree less than two Corps commanders. Auchinleck thoroughly revised the whole issue and concluded that "*critical circumstances-such as explain later-I couldn't keep a field commander whose ability to implement my intentions I didn't have full confidence*".⁽³²⁾.

In Cairo, he found a dispatch of Churchill:

"1. I got your message of the 24th. I welcome with enthusiasm your perspective and your intentions; Her Majesty's Government wishes to share in the responsibility to continue to fight to the bitter end, such that it can be the result. We play everything and I'm sure you are the stronger and win.

2. You will most certainly get my message with which I announced that today reaches Suez the rest of the 2nd Armored Division. Occupy in the battle as soon as possible without any worries for the future, if this can be useful. Encouraging then the enemy with all your units, succeeds to crush.

3. Your splendid morale and your strength of will are a great encouragement to me. A «bravo» to Tedder and R.A.F. for obtaining air dominance"⁽³³⁾.

If residual hesitations Auchinleck had, these would certainly fall. Also wanted to mention the measure with Oliver Lyttelton, Minister of State, and found him quite consenting. Therefore he communicated the decision to the Gen. Alan Brooke-that on November 19 had replaced sir John Dill as Chief of the Imperial General staff-and then informed the Prime Minister, out lined a panorama of the operating time. The up coming of the battle, he wrote, were still hanging in the balance, but was convinced to only insist to win it. The opponent, very skillful and determined, attacking everywhere in "*desperate attempt*" to disrupts British units and throw them into chaos. Moreover it had scarce reserves and up to that point had failed to shake the steadfastness of the 8th Army. His efforts had been only partially successful, and locally. "*As long as we continue to press toward Tobruk the real initiative will remain to us, and we can therefore overlook the diversionary thrusts made by enemy verses to Sollum or Fort Maddalena, or even further East, however unpleasant they may be.*" So any attention had to be paid to Tobruk and the basis for a happy outcome certainly existed.

"I telegraphed-added-the Chief of the Imperial General staff to tell him that I decided to replace General Cunningham, tentatively with General Ritchie, my current Vice Chief of staff. This is not why I nourish details apprehensions on the current situation, but for the fact that I've come, reluctantly concluded that Cunningham, admirably so far, began to move towards a defensive rather than offensive behavior, primarily because of the heavy tank losses sustained. Before taking this drastic decision I have long and carefully weighted the question and I consulted with State Minister immediately after my return here, this afternoon. I am convinced that it acted for the best, even considering the unfavorable repercussions that such a decision can have in General in the present moment. I will try to give what the minimum advertising possible (...)" ⁽³⁴⁾.

Ended the long telegram indicating the course of action that had agreed to adopt at the border and in the Interior. The armored cars of the army had the task of defending the rear areas, including Sidi Omar, fort Maddalena and the railhead of Misheifa against possible German strikes, while the light forces of the *Oasis Group* continued to advance towards the communications line el Mechili-Benghazi-el Agheila to stop traffic on it.

With the vigorous immediacy typical of his character, Churchill approved without reservation and in the evening of that same November 25 felt the need to write to Lyttelton: "*the authority of General Auchinleck on all commanders is absolute and any decisions we take during the battle will be confirmed by us. Fully endorse your work and your attitude. Communication to General Auchinleck shuffle*" ⁽³⁵⁾. But the next day he thought better of it and was very convinced of the solution adopted.

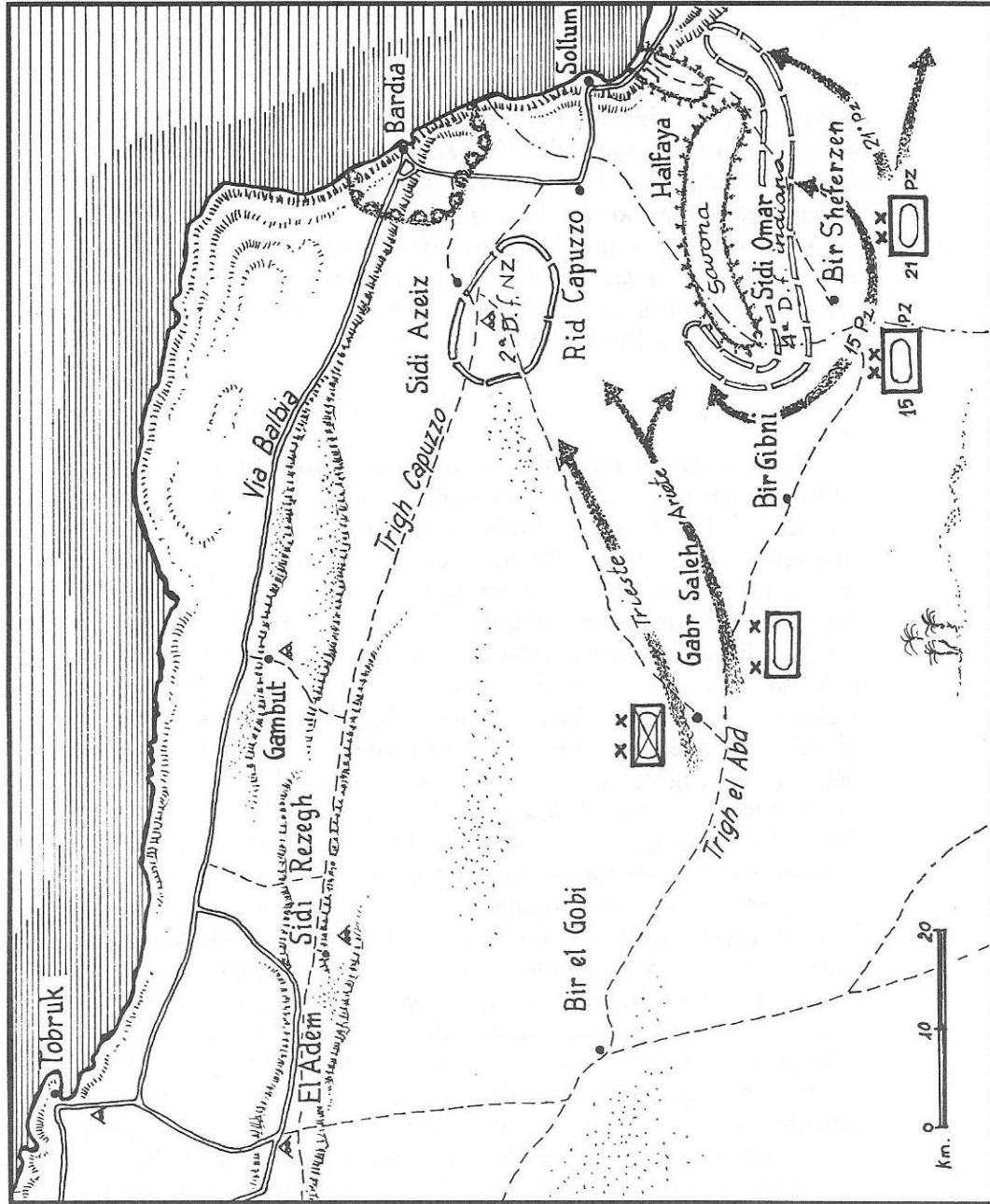
"The Chief of the Imperial General G.S. and I-telegraphed to Auchinleck the 27th-we wonder why you, you have saved once the tide of battle, not continue to direct it again until the victory. Your presence on the field will give courage to all. However, it is up to you, of course, take any decision in this regard" ⁽³⁶⁾.

Auchinleck had expected similar observation and replied:

"I have considered very carefully the opportunity to personally take the place of Cunningham as Commander of the 8th Army. I am well aware of the decisive importance this battle, but I ended up finally being more useful to the Grand Headquarters where I can follow the battle as a whole and retain a greater sense of proportion (...). Of course, if necessary, I will go to the front lines to visit Ritchie" ⁽³⁷⁾.

IL DISEGNO OPERATIVO DI ROMMEL
il pomeriggio del 24 novembre

Schizzo n. 64



Churchill stayed with his idea, but they insisted.

In the early afternoon of 26 November, on Gen. Eric Dorman-Smith, Chief of staff of the command-in-Chief, arrived at fort Maddalena with two letters from Auchinleck to Cunningham, a official and a personal. The first, whose wording was similar to that of the telegram for Brooke, concluded: "*I have therefore decided to replace the commander of the 8th Army with Lt. Gen. N.M. Ritchie. Please return the appointment upon receipt of this letter*"⁽³⁸⁾. Soon after came Ritchie⁽³⁹⁾.

* * *

On the evening of 24 November, as mentioned above, Rommel had in mind by implementing an operation of annihilation of the two divisions of the British 13 Corps tightened against border defenses (sketch No. 64). He believed that between Sidi Omar and Halfaya were considerable opposing forces. The first location was a great tactical artillery complex (it was the 7th Indian Brigade) but, not having sought news from the *Savona*, unaware that the stronghold Frongia had fallen and that at Sidi Omar resisted only a third of the structure. Northwest of Sollum, at Sidi Azeiz, thought the whole collection 2nd New Zealand Division, ignoring that there was only the 5th Brigade, in addition have Musaid and fort Capuzzo. South of Gasr el-Abd, finally was accepted by British columns, probably of logistics elements.

This is the idea that Rommel had become the enemy and, on this basis, the operational design was a good indication of feasibility. About the possibility to eliminate 13 Corps, the speech changed as simply place two brigades instead of two divisions. On the other hand, even this "bite" limited would assume a certain meaning and would have been more cheaply, due to its reduced size. However external factors will prevent the planned "squishing": pressing Freyberg towards Tobruk will indirectly on events at the border; the *Ariete* will result in considerable delay (his two columns had gathered at 18:00 in Hagfet el-Areiba where they spent the night of the 25th); the relocation of British units on the Trigh el Abd will make problematic the flow of supplies to the *Afrikakorps*, logistics in very poor condition. Of course, the latter a major drawback would have fallen if von Ravenstein knew that,

a few kilometres southeast of Gasr el-Abd, *Field Maintenance Centre 50* was virtually helpless.

Given the unavailability of Italian column, on the morning of the 26th Rommel slightly altered the plan. At 07:00 he arrived with Crüwell to Gasr el-Abd, in command of the *Afrikakorps*, and there he met Neumann-Silkow. After a brief interview, he issued the orders given by the unit's war diary:

"The arrival of *Ariete* was delayed. The 15th *Panzer* to attack the enemy West of Sollum and force him to the East, against the minefields. For this purpose the Division you must explain completely between Sidi Omar and Sidi Azeiz, developing a large amount of dust, to force the opponent against the minefields and force him to surrender. The 21st *Panzer* will do the same in the East by main effort at Sidi Omar. You must also prepare a tactical infantry complex, but without tanks, with a view to an action on the oasis of Giarabub. You will collect at Gasr el-Abd and won't budge without the order of the command of the army. "

The latter provision was evidently intended Force E to cut communications, who the night before had occupied Giarabub. At that time the British situation was as follows. The 5th New Zealand Brigade blocked Bardia and kept as a diaphragm, the Capuzzo-Sollum line. The 7th Indian Brigade occupied almost the whole area of Sidi Omar. The armored cars of the *Central India Horse*, with twenty *Matilda*, four light tanks and a field battery, had formed a protective screen along the South of cross-linked Gasr el-Abd, facing West, to cover *Field Maintenance Centre 50*. Finally, South African elements (one armored car Squadron and two anti-tank batteries) facing the Halfaya positions from the South. This was what Rommel could "crush".

At 07:20 the 15th *Panzerdivision* reported artillery fire from the North-East and bore an air attack. Neumann-Silkow Rommel arrived an hour and a half later and urged to go immediately to the North, "*explained on broad front between Sidi Omar and Sidi Azetz and encircle the enemy in the Sollum area*". The Division moved, turned wide of Sidi Omar, was refueling and Ammo (at least as far as he could) and went to run into an unexpected stumbling block for some 20 km from the starting point. According to the German appreciation, it consisted of a mechanized group with about twenty *Maitlda*, which was passed by 8th *Panzerregiment* with brief but bitter fighting (and putting out of use three quarters of British tanks). Actually you

was the tanks of the 42nd *Royal Tanks* being repaired at the workshop of the 1st Tank Brigade: now placed online by crews, as it were, against a resistance, that if he could not last long seems to have been sufficient to oblige the 15th *Panzer* to spend part of the afternoon to settle out. In essence, on the one hand spoke more to send a detachment at Giarabub, secondly, towards evening, he spotted a new small enemy element near Sidi Azeiz, which Neumann-Silkow is set to eliminate the following day, then continue on Bardia and supplement supplies.

The 21st *Panzerdivision* had a far more troubled day. The command of the Division had spent the night near the Faltenbacher strongpoint. When he received the orders of Rommel (07:30 o'clock), von Ravenstein decided to seize the fort Campbell, fallen into the hands of New Zealand. Crüwell did not approve, but objectively whatever you wanted to do was becoming difficult due to the strong interspersing of units. The Knabe Group (104th Rifle) spent all day at the to go thirty kilometers between Bir Sheferzen, near which was located, and the Division command, which towards 17:00. At 07:45 the 5th *Panzerregiment* received provision to head towards Faltenbacher too, but never arrived there. Lying to the West of the wire and having seen the protective shield of the *Central India Horse*, probably made a wide turn to the South, crossing the border at el-Beida (less than thirty kilometers from the 8th Army Command), then bent northwards, passed on the edge of *Field Maintenance Centre 50* capturing some prisoners, but not being completely aware of his whereabouts so that depot a few hours after they had an normal activity-and continued the march. Almost immediately was attacked by fighters, whose advanced airport was nearby, and Col. Stephan fell mortally wounded.

After this incident, the 5th *Panzerregiment* continued northwards settling in the area of Hagfet el-Qineiqina, where they were coming in line two companies of the IV/11th *Sikh* and 1st campaign artillery after a vain attempt against the strongpoint "Cova". The clash lasted about an hour later, the arrival of a South African anti-tank battery, the Germans had to break contact, also for lack of ammunition, and withdrew to the South in the hope of tracking down their Echelon B. At 12:30 the regiment seems to find peace in Qabr Al-Hazar, five or six

kilometers east of Bir Sheferzen. Vehicles with supplies had been found and the reorganization of the units was underway when two air strikes in quick succession dispersed the transport. At 14:00 arrived Rommel, looked around to evaluate the operating level of the Regiment, then ordered him to "*point to the North and attack enemy columns South of the border, acting on broad front and stop within sight of the border wire*". The 5th Panzer was reduced approximately to the strength of a company or just over seventeen tanks, three of whom in tow. In addition had little fuel and little ammunition. The commentary on peremptory order lies in the war diary of the *Afrikakorps*. "*How then you knew, The armored regiment was stopped by the Commander-in-Chief himself and sent to attack Sidi Omar alone, without the support of artillery and with insufficient petrol*". With much goodwill the 5th Panzer moved towards Sidi Omar again. At 15:15 was spotted by 7th Indian Brigade opened fire with pieces by 25 pounds and 5.5 inches, while rapidly put into place the 2 pounds guns of the 2nd South African anti-tank artillery. The result was that hapless Regiment remained with ten tanks (three Pzkw II, five Pzkw III and two Pzkw IV), of which only three had cannon under conditions of fire, within walking distance of Bir Sheferzen, but without radio contact with anybody and without fuel because "*a higher Command had ordered all vehicles to simulate an attack elsewhere*" ⁽⁴⁰⁾.

Just to be in line with the unlucky day, the 33rd Recon Group, -free of certain elements and also attacked by the *Western Desert Air Force*, had to give up focus on Bir Habata ⁽⁴¹⁾. Everything is to be specified, while the command of the *Savona* at Bir Ghirba was unaware of the events. De Giorgis, in fact, continued to perceive the development of battle near the border based on the limited information they received or picked up. Just that day, shortly after reporting from Cova stronghold that German units were passed to the South and Southeast of the positions and that some had fueled the Cirener stronghold and Halfaya, was intercepted a radio communication's *Panzergruppe*, light in which it was said that the situation in the area of Sidi Rezegh was giving concern and that the return of Rommel seemed urgent. This De Giorgis confirmed that the *Afrikakorps* was slapping around.

The action of Rommel's command in that 25 November was frankly quite questionable. To an energy, a will,

an initiative and a rare imagination not corresponded a using, harmonious and coordinated his orders to units. Because, we must remember it is a major drawback, neither he nor Crüwell had with them their Staffs: his was almost abandoned in el-Adem (thankfully in the hands of capable and brave-we will soon see to what extent-operations Bureau Chief, Lt. Col. Westphal) ⁽⁴²⁾, of the *Afrikakorps* had been captured. If the opposing party the State of things was appreciated to the right degree, the fate of the *Afrikakorps* and the battle would be marked. But even British commands had their worry and also lacked clear ideas on what was happening.

The nod to the use of available forces of Rommel would not be complete if you do not speak well of *Ariete* and *Trieste*, both seen in the Corps of Maneuver. Rommel had established that the first to participate in the foray towards Bir Sheferzen together with the *Afrikakorps*, but not under the orders of Crüwell. He also formulated the design using the *Trieste*-evidently planning to make it flow at maximum speed-a side of the *Ariete*, to push the New Zealanders against Bardia- Sollum, but had not given any address on Gambara and even as far as you know, to *Trieste*. In essence, already departing was unclear and this is reflected in the fight around Tobruk. Restricting ourselves, therefore, to follow for the moment the *Ariete*, see the Division resume movement toward the Southeast at dawn on the 25th, staying North of the Trigh el Abd, parallel to the runway. It was not long that sign was made to artillery fire coming from the area of el-Taieb Esem ⁽⁴³⁾.

In the area between the Trigh el Abd and alignment-el Cuasc-Gasr el Abd there remained much of 30 Corp of Nonie. Two brigades were on track. The 4th armored of Gatehouse, being reordered near Gabr Saleh, and the 1st South African of Pienaar, near el-Taieb Esem. Further south the 22nd Guards Brigade protected the 62nd and 65th *Field Maintenance Centre* and 30 Corps commands and the 7th Armored Division. The 7th support group, however, was in full swing by the *Jock Columns* ⁽⁴⁴⁾. These, according to the concept of use of their creator, should be able to "carry out any task, but two. Couldn't they take land from the enemy nor keep it". And in fact represented the map used by Norrie

on the long side of the *Afrikakorps* exposed throughout the incursion. With their flying action, ambush and troubling disorder, geared to the maximum speed and ruthlessness, they managed to create a kind of curtain southern Trigh, such as to allow a brief but substantial breath still forces more in hand for Norrieo

Since the evening of the 24th the 1st South African Brigade -had learned of the proximity of a enemy armored complex, even without knowing the nationality and consistency. Pienaar, no radio link with the command of the 1st South African Division and with Echelon B, had taken to battalion commanders and concluded that settle in place to defend appeared preferable to being caught in crisis by retreat from an incursion of tanks. Instructions received by Norrie that night were in harmony with this decision. Specified that the Brigade's task was to "*harass and destroy enemy columns within a nine-mile radius*," after organization strong points presently occupied positions or if the circumstances were the worst times, the withdrawal was to take place on one of logistics centers.

Shortly after dawn on the 25th, so, armored car patrols reported the appearance of Axis tanks a few kilometers to the Northeast. Around 07:00 some Cannon shots they fear to Pienaar who was about to repeat itself, this time to his detriment, the defeat of the 5th Brigade. Therefore at 07:30 the Division command warned of being in contact with a considerable armored force and at 08:00 sent a message even more significant: "*attacked by tanks!*". In fact, on Gen. Balotta had resolved to shed light on the meeting and charged with what the right detachment of the *Ariete*: VIII medium tank battalion, a company of riflemen and 132nd artillery. The action lasted about three quarters of an hour and ended leaving Pienaar in the impression that the *Ariete* was exiting to head northward. Instead the Italian Division, stopped, being uncertain what to do. A brief discussion took place between the Commander, Deputy Commander and Chief of the G.S.. By Nisio, the Deputy, expressed the opinion that he had confronted troops in charge of protecting a large logistic center of the 8th Army; then the conquest of such a valuable objective, in his opinion, it would be worth spending a bit of time. The Chief of the G.S., which probably was the slow movement of the *Ariete*, put in evidence the lack of validity of hypotheses and remembered the order of Rommel to rush to the border at maximum

speed. As a result, it was not exactly the case of losing other hours on an obstacle that ultimately did not blocked the progression of the column. Balotta cut it short, deciding to comply with the order to the letter and resume the march.

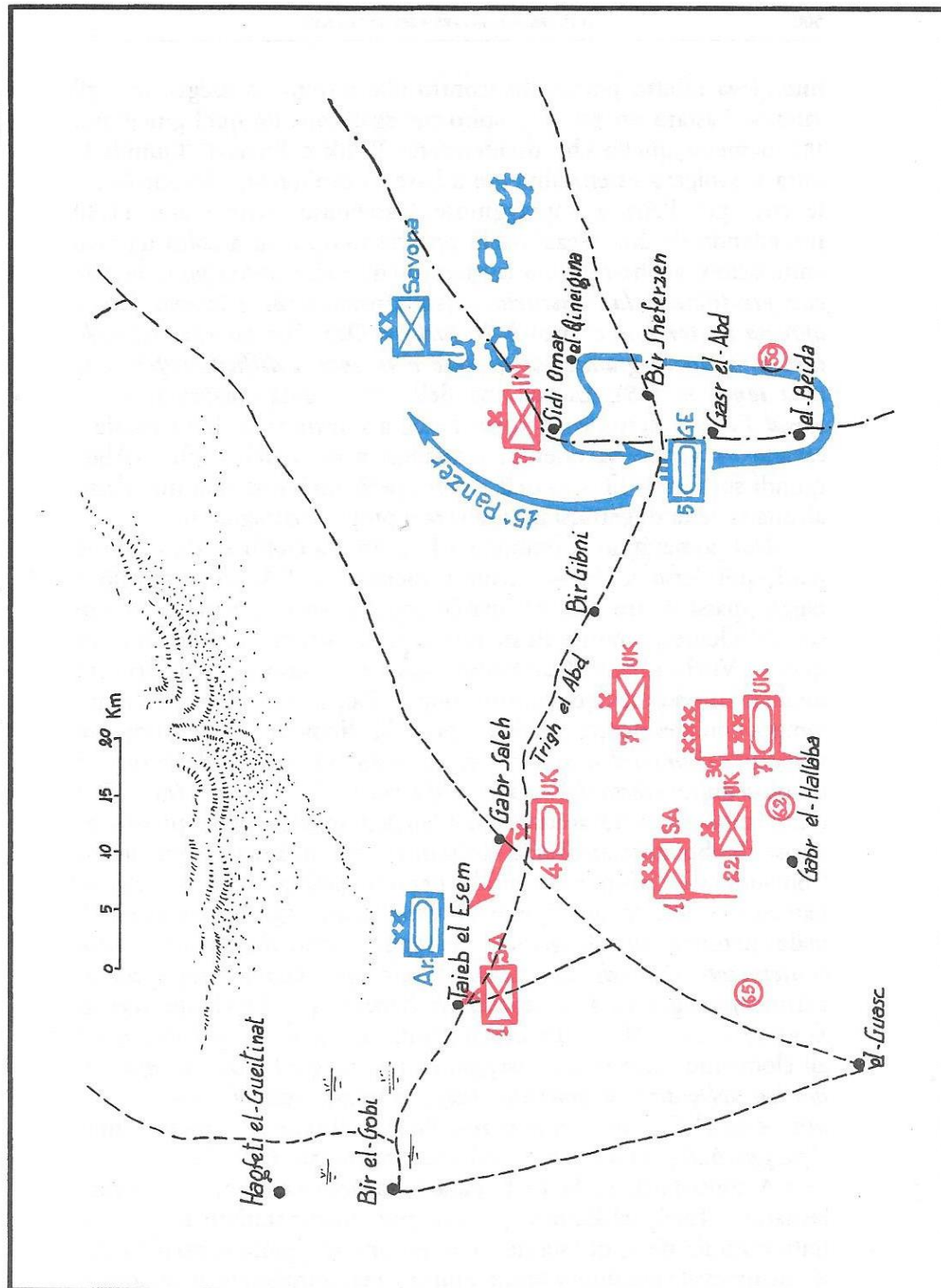
But events took a different course that neither he or ability to dominate. In the run-up of the VIII battalion the South African armored cars are retreating prompting the attacker to follow them so that when the turrets of M 13 is out on last dune, about a kilometer away, the enemy battery concentrated on the tanks a violent barrage. To recover freedom, Balotta ordered the artillery to take sides: a group of 65/17, two from 75/27, one from 105/28 and a 102 (sketch n° 65).

At 08:30 the operations Bureau Chief of the 1st South African Division, which followed the course of the battle through the radio-communications now possible-by Pienaar, turned to 30th Corp asking for the dispatch of tanks in support of Pienaar who "*is hard working and asks for aid*". The Corps's response was that the 4th armored brigade was busy at the moment busy refilling, and then immediate action it showed impossible. But Pienaar continued to transmit alarming messages. At 09:15 demanded a reinforcement of tanks, to 09:45 stated that the battle was underway. Gen. Brink had seen the disaster of the 5th Brigade and just not if the felt to see doing the same end to 1st, therefore, under the constant worry of Pienaar at 10:00 he turned to radio to the Corps formal assurance that asking the 4th armored brigade would come in the morning to help the South Africans, invoking the intervention of the *Western Desert Air Force* and suggesting the use of the 22nd guards Brigade. Norrie replied clearly that before 13:00 Gatehouse would not have been able to move; He could offer only a flying column, much to distract the *Ariete* and "*that if you are aware the 1st South African Brigade you can disengage, and you can withdraw on F.M.C. 65* ", i.e. under the protection of the guards.

In spite of good intentions, the *Ariete* is increasingly engaged. At 10:45 Pienaar reported: "*heavy attack by North*" and at 11:25 "*Rejected: second attack. Expect the third*". We must however emphasize that if indeed the "*entire zone*" -as Pienaar reported- "*is swept by grenades*" Italian artillery, the South African situation was not as bad as proposed and for a very simple reason: not Balotta

IL COMBATTIMENTO DI TAIEB EL-ESEM
(25 novembre)

Schizzo n. 65



meant at all to bring the fight to the extreme; It took a bit of breath to disengage from that quagmire. More or less what they wanted Brink and Pienaar. Then the fight was essentially made from cannon fire. To make matters worse for the *Ariete* came Gatehouse. Arrived at 11:30 ahead of half an hour its unity and was greeted by alive enthusiasm, although after the war wrote that "*nothing could see that justified the conviction [South Africa] that we arrived just on time*" and that "*Brigadier Dan Pienaar was, according to me, in a State of great excitement and it was very difficult to understand what fear*"⁽⁴⁵⁾. The column of the 4th armored brigade -5th *Royal Tanks* right and 3rd *Royal Tanks* left, with two horse batteries -came from the East, keeping to the North of the Trigh el Abd, then on the left side of the *Ariete*, though also not manifested any ambitions to join in a real battle.

In the afternoon the tension and uncertainty grew on both sides, then toward the 16:00 - according Pienaar- *Ariete* began to regroup behind a smoke curtain stretched out across the forehead with the clear intention to cause decisive attack. None of this. Having regard to the tanks of Gatehouse, Balotta thought only to go out in any way from that situation. After losing a long time did not wish to lose the Division. The early evening "*Rommel himself, that there was meeting such order came to continue towards fort Capuzzo and Bir Ghirba*"⁽⁴⁶⁾. For his part, Pienaar, known pressure relief, decided to abandon Taieb el-Esem and communicated their intention to split Command so, moreover, ambiguous. The message, sent at 17:15, arrived at 20:14 to Brink. These included the actual thought of the Brigadier and immediately replied: "*you will save the current location. Alec [= Gatehouse] remains in your support (...). The guys from Bernard [= Freyberg] are doing well.*" But the 1st South African Brigade had already moved and the next eloquent message of Brink:" (...) *I did not understand you because of your movement. Please explain immediately to inform the High Command*, "Pienaar said quietly: "*I will explain in person or in writing in the morning*"⁽⁴⁷⁾.

On balance, if the 1st South African Brigade made a mistake leaving Taieb el-Esem, where albeit unwittingly had restrained the *Ariete*, this made one more involvement no need in a clash unnecessary. To complete the picture is good to point out that the Corps of Maneuvering remained entirely

unaware of events on the Trigh el Abd. Only at 16:50 Gambara received a communication from the *Ariete*, but it was the night before and noted that he spent the night Northwest of Taieb el-Esem ⁽⁴⁸⁾.

On 26 November Rommel wanted to tighten the timings. As usual he put in a good time around between units, urging them to gather while doing what he could, to while Crüwell to handle the *Afrikakorps*. Lost radio contact with the 21st *Panzerdivision*, addressed the 15th: "*Attack Capuzzo immediately. Where is the Ariete?*" (07:30 o'clock), but Neumann-Silkow ignored the order. The *Fliegerführer Afrika*, which had been asked by air intervention, explained that it could not send fighters over the sky of Sidi Omar-Sollum because the airport of Gambut had been occupied by the enemy.

The first in command of the *Afrikakorps* arrived at 10:30 from Neumann-Silkow. It was stopped the night before just over fifteen kilometers from the command of the 5th New Zealand Brigade, whose battalions were positioned at defense to Capuzzo (the 23rd), at Sollum Upper (the 28th) and on the via Balbia Menastir (the 22nd). Resuming their advance northwards, at 8:30 of the 26th had stumbled across a squadron of New Zealanders light tanks. Released them, and reported the short fight, stated of wanting to travel to Bardia. Even the *Ariete* had managed to contact radio: left at 06:00 the area north of Gabr Saleh, eluding the British 4th armored brigade, proceeded to the low speed allowed by his means towards Bir Ghirba. Conversely, no message from 21st *Panzer*.

When Rommel was in command of the *Afrikakorps* awaited him a bundle of urgent radio telegram of the previous day and night, with whom Lt. Col. Westphal was the ominous situation that he was outlining at Tobruk due to renewed bouts of 2nd New Zealand Division and vehement efforts of the garrison to break the encirclement. It also warned that mechanized elements were appeared around Bir el Gobi. In conclusion, Westphal wondered repeatedly and openly the return of *Afrikakorps* to seize on the side or behind the New Zealanders that pressed against the Boettcher. Crüwell supported the request to send at least one Division, but Rommel shook his head. Even a lot of unspoken importance to the destruction of the aircraft carried the surveyor's map with the location of the enemy's forces in and around the fort and

Sidi Rezegh. Recognized, it is true, that he had underestimated his opponent's possibilities to Tobruk and the danger arising from them, however insists that the most urgent thing to do was to resolve the question of a clear border. All units were to be used to push the enemy on minefields and induce him to surrender. This program resulted, in practical terms, in a strange and unexplained stand still of operations.

From the area north of Gambut, logistics area of the *Afrikakorps*, had left the Briel group with some repaired Pzkw. The intention was to sweep the 22nd New Zealand battalion deployed at Menastir and open the via Balbia to German supplies, but the effort stalled in the face of guns that supported the barrier of Menastir. Perhaps because of shortage of ammunition and fuel or perhaps for lack of reliable information, the 15th *Panzer* declined to provide the initiative to eliminate the obstacle and took Bardia to make full and settle out, very hard work not being equipped to the fort. On the other side of the border, the Knabe Group spent the day at stronghold Paltenbacher. completely idle. At Gasr el-Abd the war diary of the *Afrikakorps* recorded at 16:30: “no report from 15th or 21st *Panzerdivzision*, despite repeated requests!”. But mid-afternoon the two divisions began moving.

Crüwell had placed that Neumann-Silkow, not just supply, occupied the fort Capuzzo -Musaid area to join von Ravenstein. The 115th infantry began the action shortly before 17:00, but failed to unseat the 23rd New Zealand battalion and suffered harsh reprimand from Rommel, suddenly arrived on the spot. Irritated-for the device adopted, he ordered that the attack was postponed, the aftermath and carried out in such a way as to be concluded quickly. Von Ravenstein was in a privileged situation in a certain way. It was the only radio link with Westphal. In the afternoon he received a dispatch from worried: “from the *Panzergruppe* via the 21st *Panzer Division*, to the Commander of Corps. Enemy infantry with thirty tanks behind Boettcher, his right is attacked by tanks, reconnaissance reports had identified more armored forces at 14:00”. The forwarded immediately to Crüwell, fortunately at that time in contact, which obviously knowing how--the thinks Rommel-responded (15:12 hours) and then go to the rescue of Boettcher if they would be talked about, maybe, the next day. However, at 17:00 the 21st *Panzerdivision*, or rather the Division Command and the Knabe Group

fled the Faltenbacher strongpoint -for Bardia, having also need to refuel. They headed towards Musaid certain as free or confusing it with the fort Capuzzo, believed back in German hands, and met most of the 28th New Zealand battalion. This clash was poorly directed, only after an hour von Ravenstein was passing, leaving a lot of material and sixty men.

The arrival of the 21st *Panzer* at Bardia, Rommel was an absolute surprise. According to a well-known version, von Ravenstein-that by noon of the 25th had been achieved by the directive of Rommel to prepare to attack in Egypt-at 14:00, i.e. two hours later, he received a message from Westphal: "*all orders transmitted to you so far are cancelled, the 21st Panzerdivision must break through Indian lines towards Bardia*"⁽⁴⁹⁾. Of course the thing is likely, but has the side more than an objection: the shape of dispatch is not such as to make it appear urgent return to Tobruk; between 14:30 & 15:15 and had passed through the radio centre of the 21st *Panzer* the two posts mentioned earlier (that's *Panzergruppe* for Crüwell and the response of Crüwell) and it is strange that von Ravenstein has not taken into account, at least to inform Crüwell. There are, admittedly, two written records. Bayerlein reported that "*Westphal decided eventually to act on his own initiative and recall to Sidi Rezegh the 21st Division. When Rommel was aware of this order, believed at first that it was a trick of the enemy, but shortly after had to convince themselves that it was true*"⁽⁵⁰⁾. Von Mellenthin presented the events in the following terms: "*In this time of crisis Westphal-unable to get connection with Rommel or with the Afrikakorps - took the responsibility to send a dispatch to the 21st Panzer: cancelled every provision of pursuit and ordered the Division to quit Tobruk in order to attack the New Zealanders from behind*"⁽⁵¹⁾. Both authors, however, have summarized the events rather summarily and without specifying date and time, so that a careful examination of German documents⁽⁵²⁾ version doesn't seem to hold up. The real "*order*", peremptory and unambiguous, as Westphal was sent-as we shall see-at 05:57 next morning, 27 November, the 15th *Panzer* and not the 21st.

All in all, von Ravenstein may have acted, at least in part, by elementary initiative need to call in and put in order the units that had with him and probably also because he thought to

chance to be addressed at great speed towards Tobruk the next morning. Of the episode, however, remained in secure track, Rommel especially since three days after von Ravenstein fell prisoner. The *Panzergruppe* report of the battle of the Marmarica, completed a few months later, he leaves transpire concerns: "*the matter has not been clarified in a satisfactory manner.*"

The *Ariete*, meanwhile, had reached Bir el-Hamarin, some 20 kilometers northeast of Gabr Saleh and North-West of Sidi Omar ⁽⁵³⁾. Here, at 11:00, he radioed the order of Rommel to take contact with the 15th *Panzer* which lay to the West and North of fort Capuzzo. While the Division moved, came Rommel in person who directed the drive towards Bir Ghirba. Neither he nor Crüwell were willing to lose definitely Sidi Omar and not being able to use the 15th *Panzer*, in power crisis, thought to *Ariete*. This however had to first relieve the rear of the southern sector of the *Savona* from pressure exerted by the Indian Brigade and 7th Cavalry squadrons, then aim at Sidi Omar to restore the situation, but mostly to close from the circle on the opponent. Moved to a short distance from Bir Ghirba and got connection with elements of 15th *Panzer*, the *Ariete* was unfortunately hit by an air raid that brought to the point that losses and logistical problem. The request addressed to the Corps of Maneuver to be powered via Bardia, received negative response: cannot use Bardia, was that rely on truck column sent from Bir el Gobi! Meanwhile Balotta fled Bir Ghirba to get some info, at least to the extent known by the command of *Savona* (something that Rommel had never felt the need to do), and make arrangements with regard to the action against the 7th Indian Brigade. We must admit that the news on the enemy were very vague, except for what was the stronghold of Sidi Omar. This may explain how in this desert environment, the lack of information, on the basis of peremptory orders that was generic thought it advisable to prepare a systematic attack southward against an opponent not well identified, apart from combat patrols circulating here and there (and probably considered real battle groups). On the evening of 26th was allocated to the preparations.

Further South was down a certain calm which took some minor German units to gather East of Bir Sheferzen.

Even the British 30 Corps was rearranging. The three armored regiments (11th Hussars, *King's Dragoon Guards* and 4th

South African) acted with an aggressive across the vast space between Bir el Gobi-Sidi Azeiz, and giving many annoyances to the supplies of the *Afrikakorps* and the *Ariete*. South of the Trigh el Abd there were *Jock Columns*, which are looking for the best way to upset the rear, so to speak, of Germany. Derived from this continuous and fluctuating movement of small independent units, isolated stragglers elements, columns of food and ammunition, detachments in search of own Command etc. The 7th Armored Division had lost the 7th Armored brigade of Davy, returned to Egypt to reform (but then will go to Burma), and 22nd of Scott-Cockburn, passed under the 13th Corps ⁽⁵⁴⁾, but back in order-the 4th Armored brigade of Gatehouse which now numbered 77 *Stuart*. In that regard, just in the area of el-Taieb Esem, in the afternoon, the 5th *Royal Tanks* had blocked a column of Water supplies escorted by four M 13, forcing her to return to Bir el Gobi, from where it had departed. The tanks had not stalked, but that node of slopes was an importance that they had escaped to Norrie. At 15:35, indeed, he had commanded the 1st South African Brigade, responsible for now the safety of *F.M.C.* 65, of post items on access roads to Bir el Gobi, what soon known by the Corps of Maneuver.

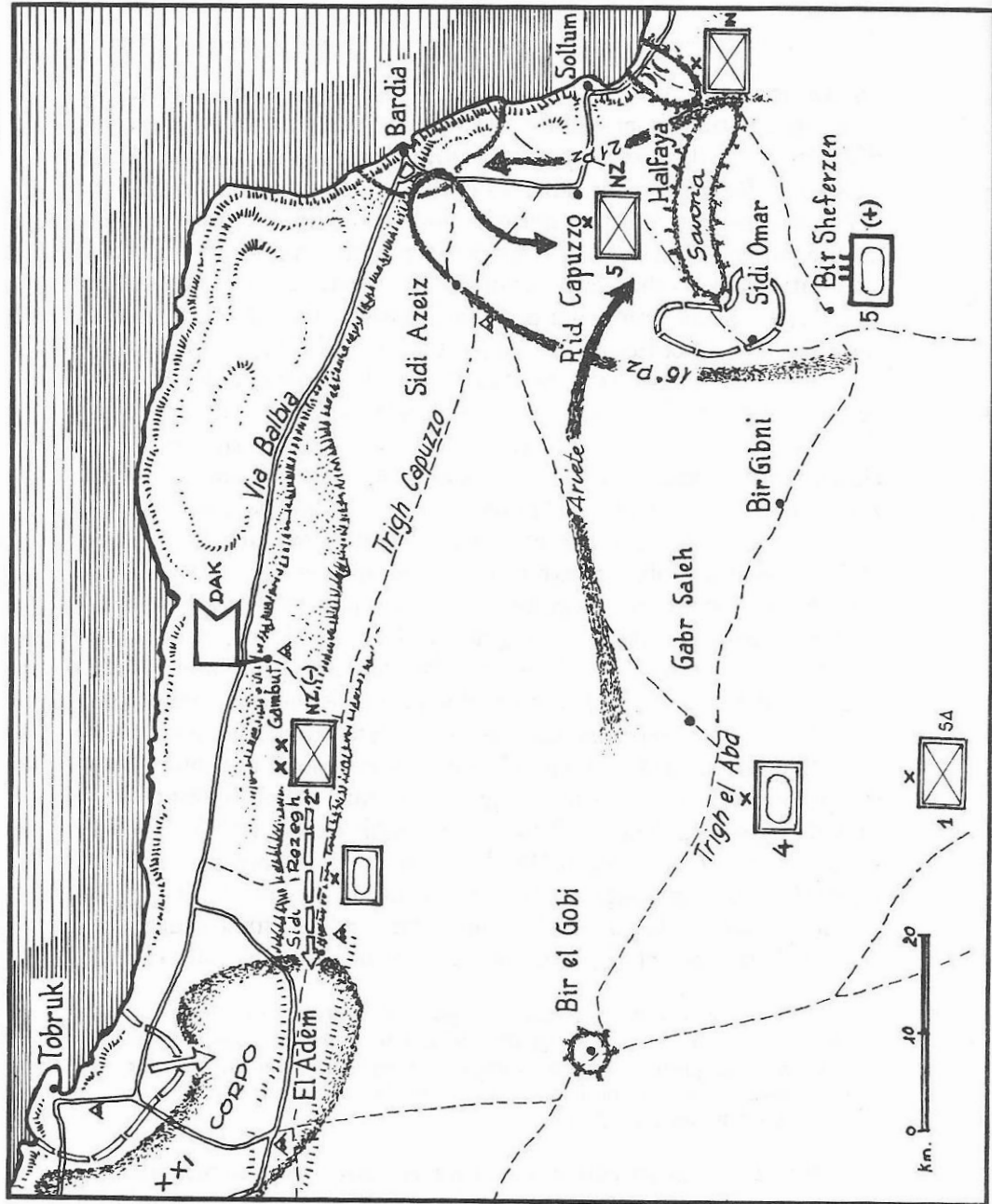
Back at Bardia, Rommel was not many illusions and well understood that behind him, at Tobruk, a serious concern as to worry. He knew that his men were tired, knew the logistical difficulties of its armored divisions, was aware of unit displacement, although the large divisional were approachable. A comment on the German situation at nightfall of November 26 seems well-tuned to reality:

"The conduct of operations by Rommel during his foray into the Sollum area appears confused and aimless. Even taking account of the inadequacy of the available immediately, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that in those circumstances he was not up to his usual skill" ⁽⁵⁵⁾.

At 21:00 Rommel summoned von Ravenstein and Neumann-Silkow. Event summary (Sketch No. 66), and verbally gave orders for the next day. Wanted to make a last attempt. The 21st *Panzer*, always with the Knabe Group at 09:00 would leave Bardia heading towards el Adem, along the via Balbia; the 15th *Panzer*, instead, he searched the area of Capuzzo -Sidi Azeiz in order to release their rear border defenses and then you would

LA SITUAZIONE LA SERA DEL 26 NOVEMBRE

Schizzo n. 66



also started to Tobruk. Crüwell, with 3rd Recon group and the 5th *Panzerregiment* would resume Sidi Omar. The *Ariete*, as we know, had to make their way up at Sidi Omar and cooperate with units of Crüwell. These provisions were confirmed in writing before 02:00 of the 27th, but with a very significant variation. The 15th *Panzer* was not to be confined to the Capuzzo -Sidi Azeiz zone, but attack “*on broad front against Sidi Omar - Capuzzo line* ”. Regardless of the different effort to Neumann-Silkow, deserves emphasis the strangeness of the lack of any coordination with the *Ariete*.

Incidentally, the operational design was to hinder an action planned by the local commander of the fort of Bardia. Having been clearly identified the major enemy batteries that pelted the garrison, with Gen. Schmitt had decided to carry out a offensive reconnaissance that night there should participate a German training battalion and two companies of the II/15th infantry with two pieces of 75 (carried forward in the round by a single German tractor). However Rommel, informed of the initiative, made him pause. Since then the situation of Bardia remained stationary, except British aerial-bombing and a sporadic combat patrol activities.

NOTE TO CHAPTER EIGHT

- (1) Until December 2 the operational orders were given verbally by Rommel. Those sent in writing or via radio were signed by Chief of staff or impersonally, from the *Panzergruppe*.
Operation orders were not transmitted, as in the Italian army, *commanded* to tactically superior. In addition, unless they were given verbally or by radio, were delivered at a given hour each evening at the official employee sent to Division command of the *Panzergruppe*.
- (2) As an example of how the situation was little known, you can quote a dispatch from Comando Superiore to the Comando Supremo, compiled at 14.30 on 24 and sent to 17.13: "(...) *In the area of Bir el Gobi continues opposing armored units encirclement maneuver by the Ariete armoured Division and German armored divisions* (...)" (DSCSAS, tele 19781/0 p-1 date 24.11.1941).
- (3) J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 291, note 15.
- (4) GEORGE CUFTON, *The Happy Hunter*, Cassel and co., 1972, p. 131.
- (5) ALAN MOOREHEAD, *war in the desert*, Garzanti, Milan, 1968, pp. 128-129.
- (6) J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 297.
- (7) C. AUCHINLECK, *Dispatch*, cit., p. 377.
- (8) C. BARNETT, op. cited above, p. 170.
- (9) EVE CURIE, *Journy Among Warriors*, Heinemann, Ltd., 1943, p. 52.
- (10) D. YOUNG, op. cited above, p. 147.
- (11) At 16:00 the command of the CAM lost radio connection with the *Ariete*. At 02:00 of the 25th ask News of the Comando Superiore, the *Panzergruppe* and the Liaison Office of the 15th *Panzer*, but to no avail. Only at 11 a.m. arrive at CAM a radio message from *Ariete* with the 6 o'clock news: no news, the Division was moving towards Gabr Meliha (which had to be reached-the previous evening).
- (12) Were many high ranking commanders that more than once found themselves isolated in the middle of the desert. Some had luck, as Rommel, Crüwelt, Gott etc.; other misfortune, as von Ravenstein, who was captured on November 28.
- (13) Column of Freyberg consisted of: command 2nd New Zealand Division, 4th New Zealand Brigade with 20th and 21st battalion; 1st British tank Brigade with two squadrons of the 8th Royal Tanks, one of 42nd Royal Tanks (86 all in *Valentine* and *Matilda*) and 8th campaign artillery (with 16 pieces by 25 lbs.); smaller units.
- (14) M. CARVER, op. cited above, pp. 121-122.
- (15) The command in question had been held since Gen. Sümmermann until early November, when he assumed command of the Division Z. B.V. *Afrika*.
- (16) The idea was kind following fierce resistance from an item like that, among the works by siege standards of the fort of Tobruk, during a sortie of the garrison of the enemy, had resisted for several days, despite being completely surrounded, and until the reconquest of lost positions by Italian troops.

- (17) report of Gen. De Giorgis.
- (18) The 7th Indian Brigade consisted of: Brigade Command, 1 battalion *Royal Sussex*, IV/11th Sikhs Regiment, 4th/16th Punjab, 25th campaign artillery, 65th anti-tank artillery. In: 42nd Royal Tanks, a squadron of 44th Royal Tanks, 1st and two artillery batteries of 7th field heavy artillery.
- (19) report of Gen. De Giorgis.
- (20) Almost all officers captured, including the Commander of 16th and III/16th infantry, were vacated in the vehicle by the enemy on the 24th, but the small column was intercepted by a unit, of the 21st *Panzerdivision*. Officers, freed, were taken the next day to Halfaya Pass.
- (21) The *Oasis Group* was composed of the 29th Indian Brigade, the 6th South African armored car Regiment (with a single squadron), the 7th South African reconnaissance battalion (two companies), a battery of artillery from 2nd South African campaign the 73rd anti-tank artillery and British 6th light anti-aircraft artillery
- (22) Seems strangely overlooked the fact-known-that the *Trieste* was concentrated at Bir Hakeim.
- (23) Forza E consisted of: Advanced Command of the 29th Indian Brigade, 6th South African armored car Regiment (with a single squadron), 7th South African reconnaissance battalion (two companies), III/2nd Punjab, an anti-tank battery (4 pieces from 18 lbs. and 12 from 6 lbs.).
- (24) With nonchalant exaggeration, the Comando Superiore A.S. told the al Comando Supremo that “ (...) *Aviation does not abandon this column continuing bombing action and machine gun attack*” (DSCSAS, tele 01-19595 21.11.1941 date, hours 18.11).
- (25) DSCSAS, tele/30955 Ap date. 22.11.1941, 13 hours.
- (26) DSCSAS, tele/19677 date 22.11.1941 01, 24 hours.
- (27) The blockhouse was defended by a platoon bersaglieri reinforced by a 47/32-piece and a section from 20.
- (28) the garrison of Gicherra consisted of a bersaglieri platoon with two pieces from 47/32 and a section of 20.
- (29) The OASIS was defended by two bersaglieri companies (minus the two platoons of Awjila and Gicherra), a company of 47/32, mixed accompanying weapons company, a platoon of 47/32 of the *Sabratha*, a section of 75/27, a 20 battery (minus two sections).
- (30) A group of fifteen officers and about seventy men (figures supplied by AGAR-HAMILTON and TURNER, op. cited, p. 429) was being defended in the refectory. Received the notice of surrender by Reid during the roundup of buildings, which led to the version presented by d. Young, according to which the General would have occupied Gialo. cited, p. 14 “*entering the Fort on foot in and forcing the surrender of sixty officers; surprised at the table*” (op 6).
- (31) J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited:, p. 312.

- (32) C. AUCHINLECK, Despatch cited, p. 339.
- (33) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 217.
- (34) M. CARVER, op. cited above, p. 116-117.
- (35) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 21S.
- (36) *ibid.*, p. 223.
- (37) *Ibid.*
- (38) J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 370. Cunningham's relief was officially announced only December 11.
- (39) According to Godvin-Austen replacing Cunningham with Ritchie not aroused reactions, since they were both unknown to mass of the 8th Army (c. BARNETT, op. cited, p. 179).
- (40) Rommel had to recommend Crüwell to use any means or column supplies available for cooking up a great fuss, Yes to deceive the enemy about the real extent of the German forces. According to Crüwell, who expressed "*clear reservations*" "Rommel considered even possible the surrender of enemy units (D. IRVING, op. cited above, p. 153).
- (41) Note on Crüwell war diary: "*Continue heavy air raids in the area of Sidi Omar. Considerable losses among our troops. Where are the German fighters*"?
- (42) It is worth bringing back a comment by von Mellenthin: "during critical periods in the absence of Rommel and his Chief of staff, lasted *sometimes for one only, but for several days. This threw a heavy responsibility on young officers of the General staff, and particularly on its operations office head. We accepted it calmly, because we knew that Rommel would always endorsed any decision we felt having to take. The most dramatic was absent at the height of Crusader battle in November 1941, when Westphal, as Bureau Chief, operations and myself, as the Chief Information Office, were left in complete control of Panzergruppe from 23 to 28 November. Westphal was forced to withdraw one of the most important orders of Rommel and his return to the Commander in Chief showed his appreciation by confirming the initiative of Westphal*" (...), (op. cited, pp. 54-55).
- (43) According to G. RIZZO (op. cited, p. 218) the event would occur "*shortly after [the departure] towards the hours 9:30, and to Gabr Saleh*". According to AGAR-HAMILTON and TURNER (op. cited, p. 327), fire was opened at about 07:00, when the *Ariete* was located northeast of el-Taieb Esem (fifteen kilometers west of Gabr Seleh). It seems more likely this designation, having been fire established contact shortly after, the departure of the Division and being the 1st South African Brigade, the opposing units engaged in battle, deployed one or two kilometers south of el-Taieb Esem. It is likely that Gabr Saleh has been cited as a point of reference for a zone rather wide, as often used by both sides in the desert. How much per hour stated by Rizzo, it is a radio telegram *forwarded* to the Corps Of Maneuver – and arrived at their destination at the 26th at 14:20 (was repeated because indecipherable)-but not the message compiler, or the occurrence of the event. To complete the overall lack of clarity regarding you notice that both opponents indicated they were made to sign artillery shots.

- (44) The name of the columns was from Gen. Jock Campbell, Commander of the support group, the initiative, which had formed flying mixed arm columns to hold the line of the frontier when the operation *Battleaxe* failed.
- (45) J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 332.
- (46) G. Rizzo, op. cited above, p. 220. You have no reason to doubt, although lack of feedback. However surprising that-apparently-Rommel has said flatly, as its habit, the delays of *Ariete*.
- (47) J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 335.
- (48) The historical diary of C.A.M. as of 25 November reports, closing of the day: «*The Ariete Division moved to Gabr Meliha on the 24th, who did not reach the same 24th because the difficult terrain. Nothing is known of what happened the 25th*».
- (49) D. YOUNG, op. cited above, p. 150-151.
- (50) E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 86.
- (51) F. VON MELLENTIN, op. cited above, p. 93.
- (52) See HAMILTON AGAR and TURNER, op. cited above, pp. 346-347, 354-355.
- (53) "*How and when there was arrived remains a mystery, because he had to evade the surveillance during the trip of the 4th armored brigade*" (M. CARVER, op. cited, p. 137).
- (54) That there was still some confusion in British field is confirmed by an exchange of correspondence took place between the 25th Godwin-Austen and Norrie, intercepted by the German intelligence service:
 - Godwin-Austen: "I was told that the 22nd armored brigade is to my command. However I'm still not able to make contact with this unit "
 - Norrie: «*I do not know where is Scotty (= Scott-Cockburn). No one knows!*» (H.O. Behrendt, op. cited above, p. 137).
- (55) R. K. RIEBEL, op. cited above, reported by AGAR-HAMILTON and TURNER, op. cited above, p. 349.

Chapter Nine.

THE SECOND BATTLE OF SIDI REZEGH

1. THE RETURN OF THE AFRIKA CORPS TOWARDS TOBRUK (27-28 NOVEMBER).

Around Tobruk siege continued with some fluctuation. On 22 November, the Division most committed, *Bologna*, had rejected repeated British efforts at Beludeah Carmuset, where on the night preceding the II/39th infantry had hastily formed three company strongpoints, but was tried: had lost 45 officers and a thousand men between NCOs and ranks. Yet efficient units numbered on the fingers of one hand: the II/39th infantry, II/40th infantry, the infantry/86th *Sabratha* and a couple of batteries.

The 23rd a new massive attack from Tobruk southward fell on strongpoint No. 4 on the way to el-Adem, which forced Navarini join with units of the *Pavia* ⁽¹⁾ the right of the *Trento* with the *Bologna*, from Hagfet-el Adem to the Northwest of Bir Salem, and cross the Trigh Capuzzo West of Bir Salem with other elements of the *Pavia*. Meanwhile Gen. Siimmermann advised infiltration of tanks behind the Eastern device.

After twenty-four hours, during which had been quickly put together a complex of forces under the command of Gen. Boettcher, rekindled the fight. It is not easy to describe the unfolding of the events of 25 and 26 November in the Southeast of Tobruk, which resulted in the return of the *Afrikakorps*, given the intermingling of units and convergence of the direction of the British and New Zealand attack. We will try to summarize the story, very harsh, per day and per face.

25 NOVEMBER.

Before the Division of Freyberg only existed the very heterogeneous group Boettcher, who, originally consisting of artillery, had incorporated most of the *Afrika* Division infantry to try to achieve a unified defense of Belhamed-Sidi Rezegh ⁽²⁾. Of course, when that

morning Freyberg, moved the German positions were rather isolated from each other and barely able to cope with a systematic attack. The 4th New Zealand Brigade had so easily reach Zaafran, while losing eight *Matilda* of the 44th *Royal Tanks*; the 6th however, could seize the *blockhouse* only by overcoming some snag. Anyway around midday Barrowclough had 20th and 24th battalion West of Wadi Rugbet, the 26th Sidi Rezegh airfield and 21st at the eastern end of the Ridge at Bir Bu Creimisa. Meanwhile, at 11:15, Godwin-Austen had issued orders for the continuation of the action. British part was realizing what was called "*quite improperly the Sidi Rezegh and Duda corridor* ", that is the broken lock and the meeting with the garrison, and harmonize the two couplings-from Tobruk and East-preventing the troops employed in the two efforts will shoot him. Truth be told, Scobie seemed more inclined to expand the salient created that extend up to ed Duda, as they feared the termination, but Godwin Austen was still in this position indicate for the junction of forces. To eliminate fears of Scobie, ruled that doesn't move until Freyberg had not possessed by ed-Duda.

The 2nd New Zealand Division was tasked to occupy the dominant positions by the East approach to the fort, namely Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed, ed Duda, that were held by the 361st and 155th German infantry. Such objective achieved, the 70th Division was in turn reach the escarpment of ed-Duda. Freyberg was quiet. Had over fifty *Matilda* and *Valentine* and considered to have passed major difficulties. On the other hand was starting to have trouble for supplies because on its line of communications had placed the *Afrikakorps*. Therefore pointed to a rapid operation, from start that same evening of the 21st the 1st Brigade with two squadrons of the 44th *Royal Tanks* against Belhamed and the 6th Brigade with a Squadron of the 8th *Royal Tanks* against Sidi Rezegh and, successively, ed-Duda. According to the forecast, very optimistic, the objectives were to be achieved before dawn, after which he could fulfill Scobie own part safely. Given the limited time available for organizational, occurred just a few drawbacks. The 18th and 20th battalion of 4th Brigade, responsible for conducting these on Belhamed, were not prepared before the 22nd, advanced laboriously and some companies were wrong direction in darkness

of the night, but finally at about 02:00 of the 26th was almost entirely occupied Belhamed⁽³⁾. According to opponents, was defended by Belhamed a small German Engineering unit who, after brief resistance would have withdrawn to the North, and the most important German stronghold in the area would be found “*halfway between Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed*”,-something that no New Zealand Commander realized for a few hours⁽⁴⁾. Do you know the German device in that sector, except that it was based on the I/155th infantry *Afrika*; However by the order No. 2 of Boettcher, it appears that the sector limit between said battalion and 9th bersaglieri ran with 150, level curve that bounds the Belhamed position at Rugbet en-Nbeidat⁽⁵⁾. Also by examining the map should be not what could be durable resistance stronghold once fall of Belhamed: southward up evenly at the foot of the Sidi Rezegh Ridge, i.e. by hill 154 to hill 129. Therefore, if the 4th New Zealand Brigade have actually occupied hill 154 of Belhamed and not a position just to the East, the “*stronghold halfway between Belhamed and Sidi Rezegh*” had to be a German structure of arrest incline backwater or nearly so, or a position held by the XXVIII bersaglieri battalion⁽⁶⁾.

In response to urgent order of XXI Corps, the 9th bersaglieri (minus the XXXII battalion and other smaller units) had arrived in the area in the afternoon, led by a German officer, and immediately posted by Boettcher in large defensive semicircle from Belhamed (held by the I/155th infantry) went to Bir Bu Creirnisa (II/155th infantry). The regiment was accompanied by II/21st artillery *Trieste*. He was awarded the Central sector at the turn of the Sidi Rezegh Ridge, more or less to the height of the marabuto XXVIII battalion had explained to the North, the XXX to the South and the XL in reserve, along with the battalion of the 361st German infantry withdrawn from hill 175. It should be noted that the fact it was so unclear that the diary in the evening the 9th bersaglieri historian reported: “*enemy situation unknown*”. It was mutual, on the other hand. The 6th New Zealand Brigade, in fact, not only was also in serious embarrassment of reference due to the limitations of vision, which greatly complicated his task even harder than the 4th, but also had to deal with an unforeseen obstacle: the presence of the 9th bersaglieri on Sidi Rezegh Ridge and the passage of Abiar el-Amar.

On the front of Tobruk the efforts of the British 32nd tank Brigade to break through to Carmuset Beludeah resumed after nightfall. At 22:00 he began firing preparation artillery and an hour after the attack began, that rejected both the Beludeah and Carmuset to the southwest of the village, was repeated at midnight. Gen. Gloria asked some *Panzerjäger* to Gen. Sümmermann, but could not get the required help and stronghold 24, left flank of small defensive system of Carmuset Beludeah, ceded in part. A local counter-attack led by the garrison of the airfield of Bu Amud manifested hollow, that at 01:10 the stronghold 24 was overrun.

26 NOVEMBER.

The first New Zealand unit to run at the defenses of Sidi Rezegh (01:15 hrs) was the 24th battalion, followed by the remains of the 25th. Stopped in front of the XXX bersaglieri dismayed, then diverted while the airport is put in motion the 26th. The latter, in turn, welcomed by the fire of automatic weapons and throw a barrage of artillery group of the *Trieste*, it stopped suddenly believing that the 24th stayed back and that their attack would be offset. Worse happened to the 21st: instructed to keep left of the 26th and unaware of the Italian presence, left the East end of the Ridge at Bir Bu Creimisa not find the explorers established, descended from the vehicles and advanced West of Sidi Rezegh to bump it too in the XXX bersaglieri battalion. Among the surprise and the difficulty to keep the direction, the 21st disorganized completely.

At the dawn of the 26th you could certainly say that the 2nd New Zealand Division was in line with the operating plan. But there was worse. From the fragmentary and confused news coming from the battlefield, Freyberg had taken the erroneous belief that Barrowclough was managed to establish itself at Sidi Rezegh. Without too much bother to identify real positions held (if the Tomb or the ridge or the airstrip) and made more peaceful by a return visit in the morning by Scott -Cockburn, whose 22nd armored brigade was collecting just four or five kilometers further South, Freyberg took every care to 4th Brigade. Gen. Inglis was in crisis. While he was settling, early morning, the Germans had opened an intense fire

artillery against the unit, causing, among otherthings, putting out of action seven *Matilda*. He had not yet identified the existence of a new static structure in his way, it was to the West of Belhamed or further South, so he thought that the offense came from ed-Duda and asked the air intervention. Freyberg began to change his mind on the situation and turned to 13th Corps command. Toward 11:00 Godwin-Austen signaled Scobie that New Zealanders had occupied Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed while being still ongoing fighting, but avid that the situation of the ammunition was considered troubling. Therefore, the garrison of Tobruk was to launch a strike decided in the direction of ed-Duda to lighten the pressure on the opposite side.

Just then that moment Boettcher led his command post near the 9th bersaglieri and, taking advantage of the arrival of Gen. Piazzoni with the XXXII Motorcycle battalion, discussed with him the possibility of an offensive action to dismiss the threat from New Zealand. However the events of Tobruk imposed a different orientation. Piazzoni returned urgently in command of *Trieste* and the XXXII bersaglieri overthrew his front to prevent regimental deployment was caught behind by British tanks.

Since 7 a.m., were resumed attempts by Willison against Carmuset Beludeah. After an hour of fighting the stronghold was overwhelmed and the tactical command of 40th infantry captured at full strength. In those circumstances, at 08:10, the *Panzergruppe* decided the to move *Trieste* under the XXI Corps and to deploy between the right wing of *Trento* (formed by grouping of the *Pavia* under the command of Gen. Lombardi) and the left of *Pavia*, in the barrier of provenances from the East and to protect the road junction of el Adem. Such a deployment would enable *Trieste*, reinforced by III/1st rapid artillery, to support with its own right II/155th German located at Bir Bu Creimisa and, in the event of failure of the 9th bersaglieri, stop with the left New Zealand to come to the threshold of Abiar el-Amar and reach the Axis road.

At the same time Gambara initiative intervened. The previous evening he had phoned to Col. De Meo, Commander of the recon grouping ⁽⁷⁾, said fears about a breakthrough of the Sidi Rezegh front and ordering him to leave from Bir el Gobi at 7:30 am units next to flow North. Now order restored: not with a

column (but with all available forces to rush to make contact with the *Pavia*. Then, "pointing in the direction of the airfield of Sidi Rezegh to attack on the left flank the enemy presses towards el-Adem" ⁽⁸⁾. To be precise, Gambarà ordered an attack "heads down", as he himself reported by telephone to the Chief of staff of the XXI Corps, and authorized the latter to lighten the front of *Brescia*, leading to el-Adem III/19th infantry, stationed in reserve West of Ras Medauuar.

On 26 November Gambarà had virtually no troops: the *Trieste* was passed under the XXI Corps; the recon grouping was linked to the *Pavia*, which was also from the XXI Corps; the *Ariete* was away with the *Afrikakorps*. Nevertheless he displayed to "manage" in any way their unity by invading the powers and accountability of course doing Navarini weigh the charge, still covered, to Chief of staff of the Comando Superiore. And it is remarkable that in the diary of *Trieste*, whose Commander had received communication of addition ⁽⁹⁾, nothing to say about it, but it appears that the Division continues to receive and execute the orders of the Corps of Maneuver. You have to just recognize that all the action in those days was based on good will, good sense and touch a few people: of Leut. Col. Westphal first, who led the battle in Rommel's name, while conscious of the delicacy of their personal position; of gen. Navarini, which included and collaborated loyally; of Gen. Boettcher, pledged to fight with his troops; of Gen. Sümmerrmann he saw almost all of his Division into the hands of Boettcher.

Between 09:00 and 11:00 the situation ceased to give reason for concern. New Zealand pressure was decreased and the Tobruk salient there was pause. It also believed that Rommel had joined the proposal to send a *Panzerdivision* towards Tobruk ("Westphal" – communicate to Crüwell at 12:20 to the 15th Panzer, where he felt was Rommel using suggests-tanks against the enemy that is behind Boettcher.), to await the arrival of the 15th Panzer! Far from imagine that Scobie's troops were preparing to break through the tenuous defensive line of the *Bologna*, at 11:00 approximately Gambarà, Navarini and Westphal had an interview at el-Adem. Westphal envisaged the possibility that New Zealanders were forced to

start the sooner a withdrawal southward and pointed the way for an eventual exploitation of success. The pursuit was to develop the Trigh Capuzzo, eastbound, with Boettcher (which would absorb the recon grouping) on the right and the *Trieste* (which would have recovered the 9th bersaglieri) on the left. The two columns were under the orders of Navarini. Gambara expressed opinion contrary to similar design, because nothing would remain on hand for plug another, stronger sortie from Tobruk. "*If you really must be made*", he added, it was appropriate that the *Pavia* changed the front of the wire ⁽¹⁰⁾.

Meanwhile he had on course the thrust of the recon grouping against New Zealand and at 12:30 left Col. De Meo advised to be at the airfield of Sidi Rezegh to get to grips with the enemy. After about an hour of fighting the unit also had to withdraw, to the South of the *Pavia*.

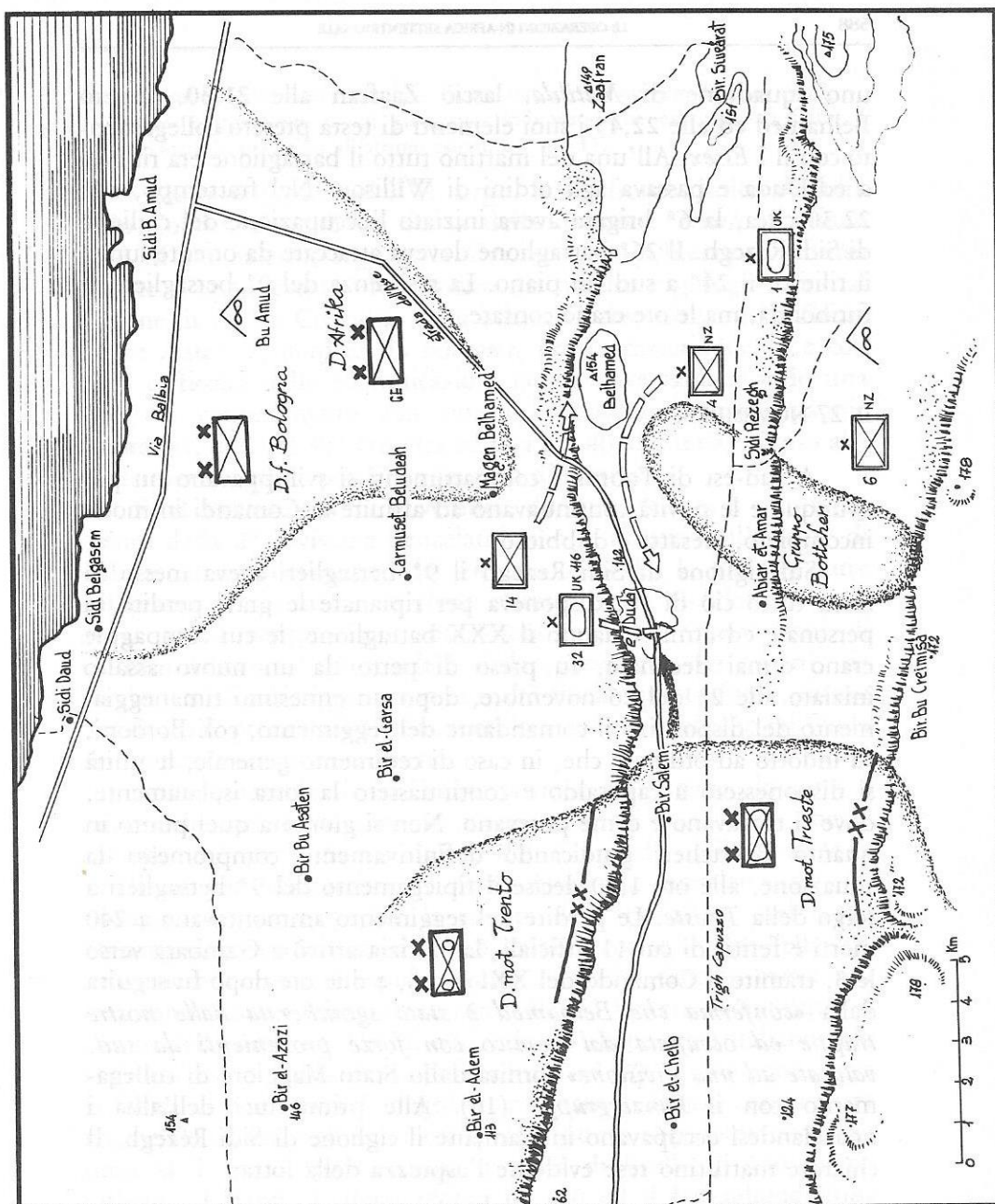
But something more important happened on the opposite side. At noon the attachment in Tobruk salient -32nd tank Brigade of Willison ⁽¹¹⁾ and 14th Infantry Brigade of Chappel-was ready: the tanks in the lead, followed by the 1st Essex battalion strengthened, supported the 1st horse artillery. To achieve the goal, ed-Duda, it was necessary to overcome six kilometers of flat desert ground. In front of the body of one was the thin semicircle of strongholds without continuity nor depth of the *Bologna* and of the *Afrika* Division. Despite the intense interdiction fire nearby and artillery barrage, the 32nd tank Brigade moved up to five hundred meters from ed-Duda, losing just three tanks, then appeared evident difficulty to proceed in a cloud of sand and dust that reduced visibility to 30 meters, either Essex received orders to get off from the media and bypass the armored echelon. At that time took place the air intervention Freyberg requested. Half an hour before had passed 16 British *Blenheim*, now it was the turn of 18 South African *Maryland*, who dropped their cargo of bombs on "*tanks, vehicles and troops*" identified North of ed Duda: to be exact on *Essex* and British tanks. Now, however, the engine was in motion and before 14:00 ed-Duda was reached. Freyberg had just radioed to the 13th Corps: "*the situation demands that the garrison of Tobruk hosts its largest effort as soon as possible. We will try to reach ed-Duda in the dark tonight*" ⁽¹²⁾.

At this point between the 4th New Zealand Brigade and 32nd tank Brigade was a distance of three kilometers, but the thing was not felt by Freyberg at least for a couple of hours. There was familiar to 15:00 from a radio message of Scobie: “*we have ed-Duda (...) make sure there bombarding from air*”⁽¹³⁾. Meanwhile, however, he had noticed personally that was dangerously exposed Barrowclough (had just rejected the attack of the De Meo group) and they had to do something, if not immediately that night. Since the 6th Brigade was worn to ed Duda from East was the 4th Brigade and, of this, the 19th battalion, only because the other two were worn out in advance until Belhamed.

The news that flowed to the *Panzergruppe*, to XXI Corps and the Corps of Maneuver were very vague. At 14:00 he knew that enemy thirty tanks pointed to hill ed-150 Duda. Gambara was-probably in agreement with Nayarini-in order to be Piazzoni a better idea of the situation and eliminate the enemy penetration. Westphal hastened to send another message to Rommel on the 21 *Panzer* (15:00 hours). Had good reasons for alarm⁽¹⁴⁾; in fact, half an hour after Gen. Gloria informed that about 40 British tanks had appeared on the Road axis, at km 13.500 and less than a kilometer from the command of the *Bologna*. While trying to retrieve something service organs, located in that area, was doing to destroy classified documents and move the command. So, at 16:00 a grouping (II/65th and II/66th infantry, I/21st artillery 100/17 and III/21st artillery 75/27) under the command of Gen. Azzi, Deputy Commander of the *Trieste*, moves to “*prevent a fall*” by ed-Duda. Twenty minutes later the II/65th infantry first came into contact with the opponent and the III/21st fielded artillery pieces straddling the Trigh Capuzzo in anti-tank or function.

Towards evening the situation could be summarized as follows: the investment front of Tobruk was ripped open on a width of almost eight kilometers⁽¹⁵⁾; among the 2nd New Zealand Division and Scobie's troops remained the only Boettcher group, perched at Sidi Rezegh Ridge North and Bir Bu Creimisa South, forced to take positions against the New Zealanders and to cover their backs against the tanks of Willison (sketch No. 67). Before midnight, things worsened. Freyberg ordered the effort planned: the 19th battalion, reinforced by

Schizzo n. 67



one Squadron of *Matilda*, left at 21:30, Zaafran overtook Belhamed and 22:40; his led elements linked with the *Essex*. At one o'clock in the morning the whole battalion was meeting in ed-Duda and passed under the orders of Willison. Meanwhile, at approximately 22:30, the 6th Brigade had started the occupation of the Sidi Rezegh Ridge. The 26th battalion was to attack from the East along the relief, the 24th South, flat. The resistance of 9th bersaglieri was furious, but the hours were counted.

27 NOVEMBER.

To the South-East of Tobruk the fights occurred almost everywhere and the news continued to flock to the commands so incomplete, inaccurate and doubtful.

Sidi Rezegh Ridge on the 9th bersaglieri had put on line all had to cover the heavy losses in personnel and weapons. When the XXX battalion, whose companies were now decimated, he was taken a breast by a new assault began at 23:00 of the 26th November, after yet another rehash of the Regimental Commander, Col. Bordoni, was forced to order that, in the case of general failure, the unit will have a stronghold and continued the fight in isolation, where they were and how they could. It was not at that point because, judging definitively Boettcher compromised the situation at 01:30 decided the withdraw of the 9th bersaglieri behind the *Trieste*. The regiment's losses amounted to 240 dead and wounded, including 11 officers. The news arrived to Gambara around 03:00, through the command of the XXI Corps, and two hours later he was followed by “*confirmation that Belhamed was cleared by our troops and occupied by enemy forces from the South; evaluated to a Division*” provided by the liaison Staff with the *Panzergruppe* ⁽¹⁶⁾. At the first light of dawn the New Zealanders occupied entirely the ridge of Sidi Rezegh. The morning glow made evident the harshness of the fight:

“(…) On the field of battle there was a huge number of dead and wounded. A very indicative was that many victims had been hit by bullets of anti-tank pieces fired at point-blank range, which had torn the bodies apart of their unfortunate victims: it would be hard to imagine a performance more creepy or a battleground more hotly contested. The bersaglieri Regiment fights with a resolution much greater than

that usually demonstrated by Italian troops and the number of deaths, as well as the location where they lay, indicated that they had ran the weapons until the moment far (...)" ⁽¹⁷⁾.

As for the bulk of the XXI Corps, his face was turned towards Tobruk as far to the right wing of the *Trento* Division (North edge of Bir Salem); followed the *Trieste*, whose East side opposed to the gap opened by the enemy and came to Bir Bu Creimisa Ridge, where the operative part of *Pavia* began, facing South. Northeast *Bologna*, isolated physically and with serious difficulties in radio communication, was to patch up a containment line with four strongpoints (two sappers, one of 39th infantry and one of 40th infantry), behind which had taken place a couple of batteries.

If on the morning of 27 November, therefore, saw the consolidation of the 2nd New Zealand Division and breaking the siege of Tobruk, completing the success or rather the second part of the plan-a combined forces attack against el-Adem-had not even beginning, despite the stresses of Godwin-Austen. Apart from the exhaustion of both Freyberg and Scobie ignore reality until the latter, having a better idea about the local situation, said that ed-Duda was in British hands.

On the issue of ed-Duda agrees dwell somewhat because of the controversies are about ⁽¹⁸⁾ it is mentioned that the column of Gen. Azzi, sent by command of the *Trieste* to ed-Duda to lighten somewhat the pressure on the 9th bersaglieri and prevent the fall of the position, in the late afternoon before had contacted the British 70th Division. The rapid attrition of II/65th infantry had necessitated the leapfrog with her II/66th infantry, however the fall of night hill 150 ed-Duda was in Italian possession. But we see the topography of the area (sketch No. 68). the position was in the form of a large irregular T, resting side by side, with the crossbar to the East. The rod there was Hill 150 (trigonometric point), but all the T was within the 150-metre level. However, the II/66th infantry held hill 150 and the *Essex* battalion occupied the head of the T. Write the Commander of II/66th, Leut. Col. Odorici, in his report: "*at the dawn of the 27th starts the [enemy] artillery coming from Northeast and fire centers places to the East and South; on a stretch of the ridge that has a slight position domain, how can I detect the light of*

day”.⁽¹⁹⁾ So both sides were at ed Duda. In addition at 07:00 of the 27th the II/65th infantry and III/21st artillery were to fallback fold on the line Divisional, so at 09:00 deployment of *Trieste* assumed as follows: South of the Trigh Capuzzo, close to the *Pavia*, the sector of the 66th infantry (I and III/66th infantry, and III/21st artillery, 28th Engineer company); North of the Trigh the 65th infantry (II/65th and I/40th infantry, a group of 105/28), close to the *Trento*; next, directly under the command of the Division, the strongpoint of ed-Duda (II/66th infantry reinforced by a 20mm battery and twenty anti-tank pieces). The I/21st and an artillery group 100/17 were from the hand of the Commander of the Divisional artillery. Three or four kilometers further West, the 9th bersaglieri was rearranging with Boettcher straddling the Trigh Capuzzo.

Is that the position of ed-Duda was considered a simple security advance structure, created to allow the divisional deployment in conditions of tranquility, rather than place a stumbling block. In fact, Piazzoni, who felt constrained-and actually was-from in front of him, at 14:00 decided to recover by midnight the II/66th infantry, as the XXVIII bersaglieri battalion (only unit non involved in deployment), received two hours before, was intended to ensure the tactical link with the *Trento*:

“Tonight-wrote to Leut. Col. Odorici-if the situation allows it, unhook in perfect safety from contact with the enemy and bring to the Trigh Capuzzo about one kilometer southwest of Division Command, which my reserve. Joint and fixed the new battalion in introduce yourself to me”⁽²⁰⁾.

Later (18:00 hours), Piazzoni then put XXI Corps abreast of the decision with a brief report, stating that the “II/66th has completely fulfilled its role by supporting all day heavy fighting with tanks and infantry”.⁽²¹⁾ but without specifying had ordered the return. In fact, hill 150 the Odorici Battalion had placed appropriately and had many concerns. The opponent was alternating artillery fire, rifle fire, attacks by tanks, but all in all had not generated excessive fears it. You know, naturally, but Scobie at noon had reported that his forces at ed-Duda needed to be held as soon as possible⁽²²⁾ and the answer of Godwin-Austen was significant: in

present circumstances, the New Zealand Division was barely able to keep the land conquered and that Scobie was “*responsible for creating the corridor and to keep it open at all costs.*”

The abandonment of hill 150 by the *Trieste* was undoubtedly a mistake, the scope of which can best be assessed on the basis of developments of the fight, but there are mitigating both valid Navarini (although, in truth, had not shown a particular interest in the thing), for both Piazzoni. We must not ignore that the order issued at 8 am from *Panzergruppe* was such as to generate multiple interrogatives:

“1. Is by presumed the intervention of German armor from 12:00 to the rear of the enemy lined up in front of the XXI Corps.

2. The XXI Corps defends the current positions. It is therefore necessary that those positions remain in our hands until the execution of the attack by German tanks, conduct to be expected at the latest early in the afternoon. For each event the XXI Corps perform reconnaissance for an eventual withdrawal of troops with the right wing at Hagfet en-Ndeza, follows essentially the section to the left of the road to el-Adem and from here you can head Northwest with the centre of the *Trento* Division (...)”⁽²³⁾,

and, shortly after, the *Panzergruppe* dispose slightly of the *Trieste*, so as to bring the Division alignment Bir Salem -Sidi Meimun. It was precisely in relation to such instructions to the order Navarini sent at 13:00 operations for “*any fallback*” at el Adem - Bir el Gobi road (*Trento* and *Pavia* divisions on the position of strength) under the protection of *Trieste*, and certainly Piazzoni, which until then had not been explicitly instructed to save ed-Duda, thought appropriate behind the II/66th infantry.

Soon after 15:00 the news reached the Corps of Maneuver made to believe that the British armor was mass time towards East to block the return of the *Afrikakorps*, whose divisions were reported marching on Tobruk from 09:00 in the morning, as reported by German liaison officer. Therefore Gambara order (15:10 hours) that “*towards 16:00 the Trieste with the battalion which is in the western part of Ed Duda attack towards the East to resume the Ed Duda position*”, and that the De Meo group repeated action against Sidi Rezegh “*however without work hard and with the possibility to disengage after maximum damage caused*”⁽²⁴⁾. The order, of which there is no written trace, lends itself to more than a remarked. First of all,

Gambara had not at that time authority on the *Trieste*, submitted in full in the XXI Corps; Secondly, that the 66th retained much offensive ability to dislodge the *Essex* and British tanks was blatantly problematic; Thirdly, that recon grouping could inflict maximum damage “*without*” work hard was unreal.

But the main point is another. The decision to Gambara is summed up in the historical diary of the Corps of Maneuver would be reflected (for long in a very confused and inaccurate) historical journaling of XXI Corps, according to which at 15:00 (?) was made to Gen. Piazzoni a call, but not followed by written confirmation:

“Turns out that British armored forces pressed at Belhamed [?] had to change front to oppose the German troops moving westward.

Occupy with a Bn. and the Bd. of Boettcher height [stands for *hill*] of el Duda” ⁽²⁵⁾.

Now, historical diary *Trieste* makes no mention of the phone call in question, while reports that the 14:00 (just an hour before) had been filled in the order for recovery of the II/66th infantry and at 18:00 was sent to the XXI Corp command report message with which you summarize the events held at ed-Duda but without mention of the occupation of the position ⁽²⁶⁾. That Piazzoni has deliberately ignored the Corps without even discuss it if he considered inappropriate-even keep your staff quite, frankly it is a thesis that seems untenable. Neither the letter sent by Navarini the next morning apparently suitable to solve the questions. As we will see, there will be a single word of reproach for very strange thing Piazzoni, opposite that they couldn't not look deliberate and enigmatic disobedience ⁽²⁷⁾. The only attempt at explanation that you believe can hang is assuming Piazzoni, whom he knew and deployment issues to the *Trieste* protect any withdrawal of the Corps Navarini has to phone convinced the opportunity to keep hill 150 of ed-Duda only until the evening, not being able to with only the II/66th infantry seizing the *Essex's* nor influence the British armored forces.

Moreover, further north, the *Bologna* was in trouble. After new afternoon attack by from part of unit

the British Division, with the 70th infantry and tanks, on Gen. Gloria had decided a further retreat. At dusk, the remnants of the Division were placed on a new line. There wasn't much: two companies of 39th infantry, two of the 40th (a third was at the disposal of the *Afrika* div.), two sappers, some units accompanying weapons, eight light tanks, 2 batteries: in total, 2,200 officers and 110 men.

According to the verbal instructions given by Rommel on the evening of the 26th at Bardia, von Ravenstein could start at 09:00 in the morning next to el-Adem with his 21st *Panzer* while Neumann-Silkow was reserved to wipe all traces of the enemy between Capuzzo and Sidi Azeiz with the 15th. Then you would be directed also towards the West. Not that Rommel had any doubts. A sign of the uncertainty that some stirred in him can be found in the written orders issued by 02:00 of the 27th: the Wechmar Group (of 21st *Panzer*) by Gasr el-Abd was at dawn, eliminate British forces of Sidi Omar and 15th *Panzer* invest "on broad front" Sidi Omar - Capuzzo line. Neumann-Silkow observed at once that any effort at border positions would have resulted in a delay in action at Tobruk, but failed to shake Rommel from decisions taken.

Meanwhile the *Panzergruppe* growing agitation's. At 04:30 a.m. Westphal decided to insist again with Rommel: "*combat Boettcher Group -broadcast-suffered heavy casualties, forced to fallback (...). Please immediate posting of the 8th PanzerRegiment [of 15th Panzer]. Otherwise impossible to restore the situation*" and at 05:57 sent another radio message to the 21st *Panzer*: "*Tobruk Situation very serious. Immediate departure 21st Panzerdivzsion even only elements, it is of decisive importance*". Not enough, and just a few minutes after Westphal took a very courageous decision. Perhaps he felt that the 21st *Panzer* was "*under control*" directed by Rommel and Crüwell and therefore bound by the presence of superior Commands, or maybe considered easier to rush of 15th *Panzer*. The fact that it sent a real order to Neumann-Silkow: "*Impossible links to Currently Commander-in-Chief. Order your immediate departure Panzergruppe for aid against Tobruk. Situation serious*"⁽²⁸⁾. Neumann-Silkow was not waiting. At 07:00 had been informed of the presence of an opposing unit with many vehicles, a dozen tanks and artillery in the area of

Sidi Azeiz We headed immediately with the 8th *PanzerRegiment* in the first Echelon and 200th infantry in the second. After a brief and violent fight part of the 5th New Zealand Brigade -it indeed it was-was completely defeat, losing a hundred of dead and wounded and 700 prisoners, including the same Commander, Gen. Hargest.

Had become 09:00 and Rommel rushed to Sidi Azeiz. Modified the previous provisions-validating also Westphal-and immediately started the bulk of 15th *Panzer* along the Trigh Capuzzo towards Tobruk, but retained the 115th rifle and 33rd Engineers battalion: the first to attack fort Capuzzo, the second in reserve. Subsequent news from el-Adem induced him soon after to send the 115th the rifle to reach the Division, but instead sent the 33rd Engineers battalion against fort Capuzzo, considering that almost all of the 5th New Zealand Brigade had been eliminated. In the route there was the 23rd New Zealand battalion and nearby the 24th. The mistake cost him dearly in the afternoon the German unit was repulsed with almost half of the men and the means lost. Meanwhile, von Ravenstein, let pass, Neumann-Silkow had started along the via Balbia, stumbled into the 22nd New Zealand battalion at Menastir. Attempted to overcome the obstacle, but soon realized the need to eliminate it by force. In the early afternoon, then attacked. For four hours, tried to break through. At the end, not perceiving that the opponent now was giving in, followed orders of Crüwell, received by radio, to disengage and turn South, to rush to Gambut.

That morning, the terse command of *Deutsches Afrikakorps* was over sixty kilometers south of Bardia, completely unaware of what was happening and therefore considerable concern. After 09:00 Crüwell had broken the delay heading towards Sidi Azeiz to make contact in person with Rommel and especially with his two divisions. Along the way, at about 09:40, chanced upon the command of the *Ariete*, at Bir Ghirba, and had taken the opportunity to order Balotta head also in a westerly direction. While he was explaining the situation, came a radio telegram of Rommel: "*the bulk of the Corps will head to Tobruk. Sidi Azeiz enemy destroyed. Destruction of the enemy on your old Eastern front began. He should not escape southwards.*" Crüwell confirmed in order to let Balotta lose the planned action against the 4th Indian Division and hurry instead

to run to Tobruk, and in Wechmar attempting a move against Sidi Omar. *Ariete* shortly after 14:00 again in march ⁽²⁹⁾, while the 33rd reconnaissance group at 15:00 attacked Sidi Omar. It was, in truth, a commitment because von Wechmar was thought not to have a slightest chance of success; in fact resulted in an exchange of gunfire or so, also because Crüwell at 16:00 ordered him to stop the action and follow the 15th *Panzer* over to Sidi Azeiz.

British commands had not of course escape the intentions of the *Afrikakorps* to return in haste to Tobruk. The 22nd and 4th armored brigade had ample room to put in order, one southwest of Bir el Chleta-and the other northeast of el-Taieb Esem. At 10:10, soon learned about the combat of Sidi Azeiz, Norrie had returned the 22nd armored brigade to Gott, who thereby took in hand the 7th Armored Division. Norrie's thinking was simple. Intended to support the action of the 13th Corp threatening the flank and rear of the enemy. Therefore decided to concentrate the 7th armored Division to the Northwest and the 1st South African Brigade the task of controlling Bir el-Gobi and the space on the rear of the armor. The support group, however, gave the task of attacking with the *Jock Columns* Italian-German units in backflow from the frontier. More precisely, the 22nd armored brigade was to block the German avant-garde near Bir el-Chleta, where the land facilitated the raid on Trigh; While the 4th armored brigade would invest the southern flank and, possibly, rear of the enemy in the area by Gasr el Arid-.

The 15th *Panzer*, left Sidi Azeiz at 09:30, proceeded at full speed along the Trigh Capuzzo. At 13:30 the 8th PanzerRegiment crashed about five kilometers east of Bir el-Chleta. Ten minutes later, contact was established with the opponent. On both sides the clash was believed to be imminent, but British commands the thing was viewed with considerable optimism as the *Afrikakorps* was considered exhausted and despondent in retreat. The German side had allowed eavesdropping that the 7th armored Division would attack German columns South from Gambut. There was a real surprise, though for the first time the British Armored were in a position to wait for the *Panzer* on land already identified. The first act was played among 42 *Crusader* of the 22nd Brigade and 50 *Panzer* of the 8th tank Regiment (thirteen Pzkw II, thirty-two Pzkw III).

and five Pzkw IV). In addition, the English had only eight 25 pounds guns, while the Germans could deploy 24 howitzers of 105 mm. and 8 of 150 mm. Inferiority in terms of artillery (resulting from Gott assigned a task to independent support group) limited considerably the effectiveness of the effort exerted by Scott-Cockburn, however they managed to retain the German tanks until 16:00, when he got the 4th armored brigade. Departing at 13:00 from Bir Berraneb, Gatehouse had covered thirty miles to arrive on the appointment time, and it was successful.

Now the fight was serious to the Germanic, so the Crüwell column, who had recently reached the 15th *Panzerdivision*, solicited by radio the 21st *Panzerdivision*, enjoining von Ravenstein to disengage from any commitment. Von Ravenstein could only be seen tomorrow, but Neumann-Silkow was aided by luck: at dusk, the British, following a direction adopted for the war in the desert, left the battlefield. And also true that effectiveness of 88 pieces and the random arrival of nine *Panzer* repaired by German factories were taking away the 77 *Stuart* of Gatehouse ⁽³⁰⁾, but it was with relief and amazement that Neumann-Silkow saw the two British brigades withdraw separately at about eight kilometers south of the Trigh Capuzzo, with 19 tanks out of action. It was rightly commented that:

“(...) British armored forces, when for the first time were able to prevent German and to focus on parts of them had thrown to the wind, the big break. The favorable situation that had been created to protect the rear of 13th Corps and blockade to Rommel the way back to prevent to intervene was abandoned without a fight ” ⁽³¹⁾.

So Neumann-Silkow, as soon as he was sure of the enemy withdrawal, hastened to move westward to other ten kilometers: what needed to take Bir Sciafsciuf, South of Sidi Rezegh Ridge.

Rommel that night, come to Gambut with Gause using a British war booty military vehicle, summoned Crüwell to study what to do ⁽³²⁾. The Commander of the *Afrikakorps* showed a map sent to him from *Panzergruppe*, which was to note the critical situation around Tobrok and proposed. attacking Freyberg from two directions: the *Afrikakorps* was operated by Sciafsciuf Northwest, staying South of the

Sidi Rezegh Ridge; the 90th light-now called the Z.b.V. *Afrika* Division - South-East instead. Rommel did not appear very convinced. Was quite oriented to mass with all the German forces (*Afrikakorps*, 90th light and Boettcher group) against the New Zealanders by exercising unified effort from the via Balbia to separate definitely from Tobruk. However, he reserved to decide, for the time being by Crüwell to study well the terrain.

Ritchie was also spoke for the first time in the course of battle. In the late afternoon (18:45 hours) had communicated to Norrie to consider of utmost importance the prevent the Germans from escaping to the West, South of Sidi Rezegh Escarpment. But when the message arrived at its destination, Gott had already abandoned the Trigh Capuzzo, allowing Neumann-Silkow to take right where the Commander of the 8th Army would not have wanted to.

28 NOVEMBER.

The first morning of 28 November, the poor, and often inaccurate information later gave an overview rather uncertain for both sides, perhaps more for the British than for the Italian-Germans. In a sense, Godwin-Austen-who had brought his Command at the 2nd New Zealand Division on the previous day, leaving Bir Chleta shortly before the arrival of the 15th *Panzerdivision*-had not paid much attention to what was happening at the border, as well as Freyberg and Scobie, nor the threat exerted by the return of the *Afrikakorps* behind the New Zealanders. Their main concern was concentrated initially in the hallway, successively in the junction of forces. Instead, the corridor was limited in practice to hold part of ed-Duda (though the gap created between the Italian XXI Corps and the *Bologna* was several miles) and the final meeting of the 70th Division with the 2nd New Zealand was prevented by the presence of *Bologna* and the 90th Light Division to the North (actually not able to impede British intentions) and German pockets in the area ed-Duda, Belhamed and Sidi Rezegh, (in fact, little things). On balance, the troops directly involved in the fight were divided into three blocks: on the position of ed-Duda, the 32nd tank Brigade with the *Essex* and

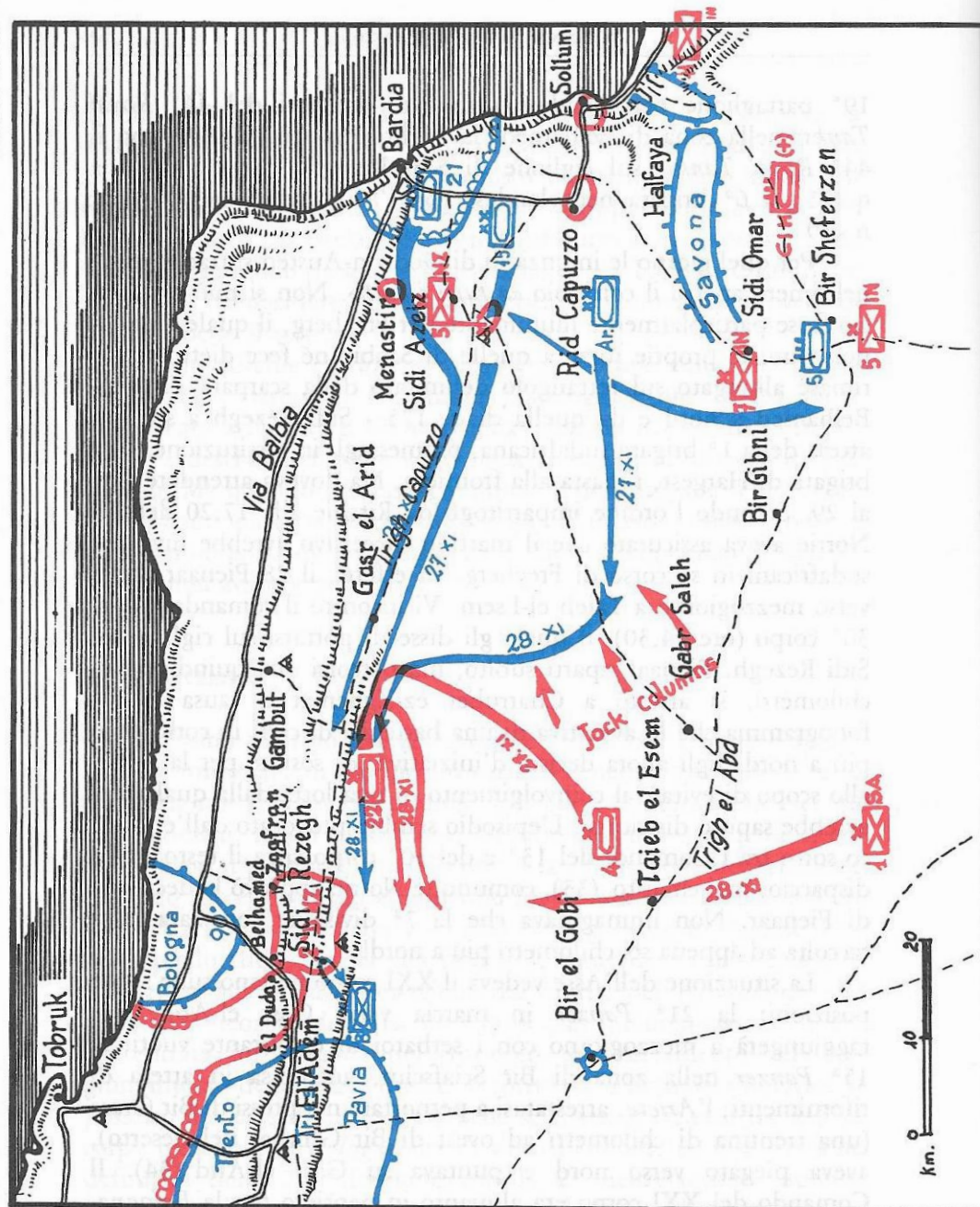
19th New Zealand battalion reinforced with tanks of the 44th *Royal Tanks*; in the area of Belhamed, the 4th New Zealand Brigade with 44th *Royal Tanks*; Sidi Rezegh on the Ridge, from marabuto to hill 175, the 6th New Zealand Brigade with 8th *Royal Tanks* (sketch # 69).

On that day the intentions of Godwin-Austen translated into keeping the corridor open “at all costs”. It cannot be said that it was particularly enlightening to Freyberg, who, therefore, not unite his forces with those of Scobie nor made behind the front: elongated rectangle was bounded by Zaafran-Belhamed Escarpment to the North and hill 175-Sidi Rezegh South, awaiting the 1st South African Brigade, promised to replace the brigade of Hargest, remained at the border. But had to wait until the 29th. According to the order laid down by Ritchie at 17:20 of the 27th, Norrie had assured that the next morning would send the South Africans to Freyberg. In fact, the 28th Pienaar arrived around midday at Taieb el-Esem. There he met the Commander of the 30 Corps (14:30 hours), who told him to move on Sidi Rezegh Ridge. Pienaar departed immediately, but some fifteen kilometers paths, stopped at ez-Zghemat Charrubet because of a radio message who warned of a tank battle in progress just to the North. He then decided, on the initiative, to stop for the night, in order to avoid involvement in a fight which would not have been able to extricate himself. The episode seems caused by misunderstanding are among 13th Corp commands and 30th Corp around the text of a dispatch never clarified ⁽³³⁾, however the decision approved by Norrie Pienaar. I imagined that the 7th Armored Division was collecting just six kilometers further north!

The situation of the Italian XXI Corps was on the same locations; the 21st *Panzer* in March to Gasr el-Afid, which they reaches at midday with empty fuel tanks; the 15th *Panzer* in the area of Bir Sciafsciuf, also waiting for supplies; the *Ariete*, stopped to stay near Bir Grasa (thirty kilometers west of Bir Ghirba, in the desert), had bent to the North and pointed to Gasr el-Arid ⁽³⁴⁾. The command of the XXI Corps were somewhat worried for the *Bologna*, also because he saw the impossibility of supply from Bardia, nor much less, from the axis Road. Neither had a clear idea of his defensive perimeter. Believing, erroneously, that it takes again the strongholds of Maghen Belhamed, at 10:00 Navarini sent an order to reoccupy Piazzoni and-Duda:

GLI AVVENIMENTI DEL 28 NOVEMBRE

Schizzo n. 69



"The S. V. must resume immediately the position of Ed Duda (hill 150) stay a strong strongpoint.

Destinies to action a Bn. with a portion of artillery and is supported by the Divisional artillery. If necessary I ask Corp artillery's intervention. Talk now start moving.

Keep in mind that the *Bologna* Division still maintains the occupation of Maghen Belbamed (4 km northeast of Ed Duda) and that the employment of this last resort is to narrow the gap still free to enemy infiltration.

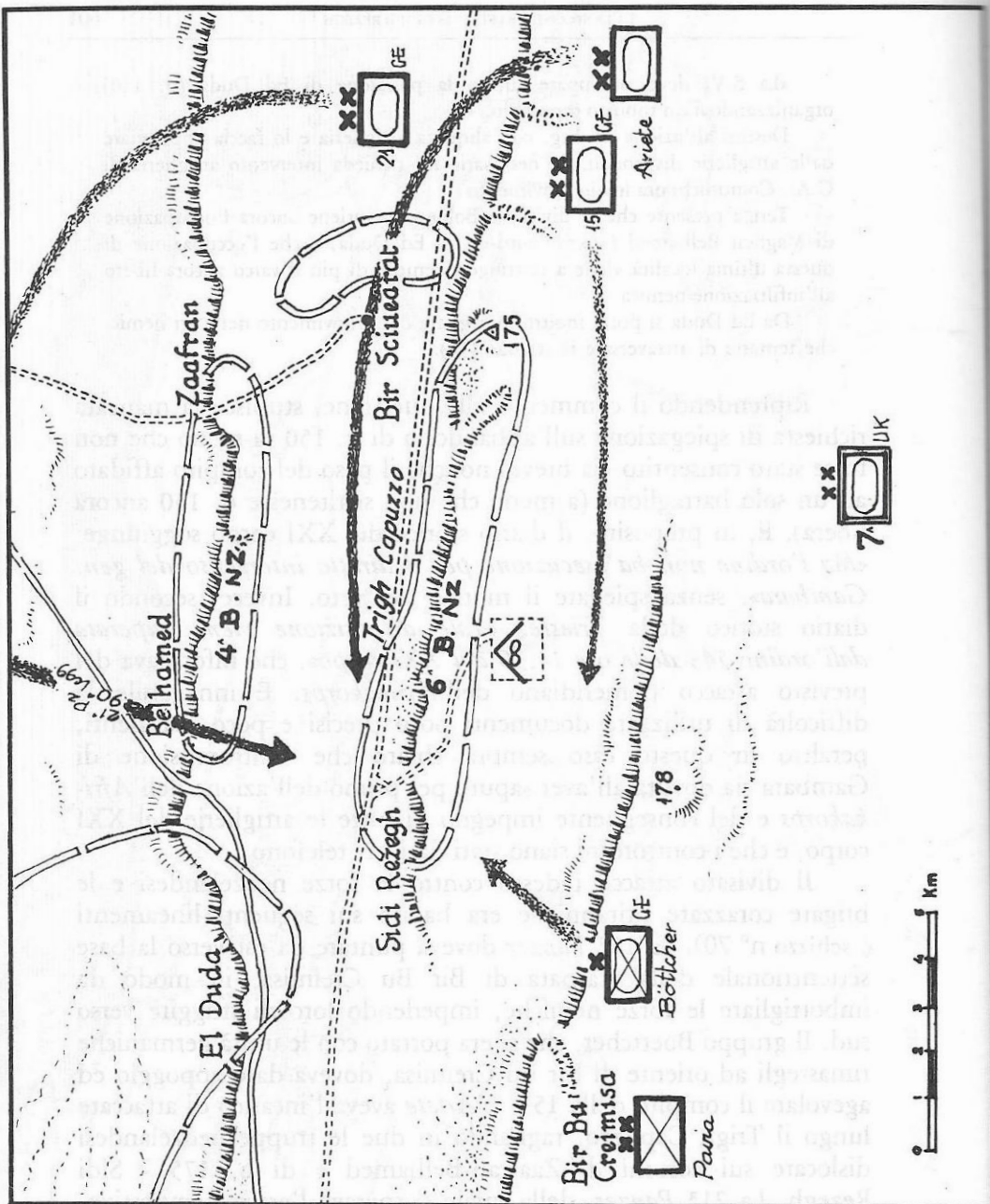
By Ed Duda also will oversee every movement of the enemy tanks attempting to cross the street." ⁽³⁵⁾.

Recovering the comment to the issue, amazing failure to request for explanation on the abandonment of hill 150 (unless he was allowed short street) and the weight of the task entrusted to a single battalion (unless one considers hill 150 still free). And, in this regard, the historical diary of XXI Corps adds: "*but the order did not run for the direct intervention of Gen. Gambarà*", without explaining the reason for the veto. Instead, according to the historical diary of the *Trieste*. "*This provision is exceeded by order 543 at 14:30 hours of the XXI Corps*", which informed of the expected afternoon attack of the *Afrikakorps*. It is undeniable the difficulty to use inaccurate documents and not very comprehensive, however in this case it seems clear that the intrusion of Gambarà is due at the first hearing of the action of the *Afrikakorps* and the consequent efforts of all artillery of the XXI Corps, and the "*counter order*" have been given by telephone.

The separate German attack against New Zealand forces and the British brigades was based on the following outlines (sketch No. 70). The 15th *Panzer* was to point from the East towards the Northern base of the escarpment to Bir Bu Creimisa, to bottle up enemy forces, preventing them from escaping to the South. Boettcher, who had brought the Germanic drive east remained at Bir Bu Creimisa, was to support and facilitate the task of the 15th. The *Ariete* had to attack along the Trigh Capuzzo, splitting into two New Zealand troops stationed on ridges of Zaafran-Belhamed and hill 175-Sidi Rezegh. The 21st *Panzer*, which it was hoped the timely arrival, was to attack from the via Balbia-Axis Road, i.e. the sector of the *Bologna*, heading south towards Sidi Rezegh. All the artillery of the XXI Corps were called to prevent New Zealand and British armored were no escape in Tobruk. It may be that the maneuver had been sketched by the *Panzergruppe*,

IL DISEGNO DI MANOVRA DI ROMMEL PER L'ANNIENTAMENTO
DELLA 2^a DIVISIONE NEOZELANDESE

Schizzo n. 70



Some had the approval of Rommel. Anyway did not implement it that day because the *Afrikakorps* was not ready, and the next day, because Crüwell thought otherwise. In lieu of such an attack, the Boettcher group performed a particular action towards Sidi Rezegh, where you ignore the origins and whose conclusion leaves much perplexed. At 15:30 Boettcher moved to positions West of marabuto and probably easier to smash the unexpected 24th New Zealand battalion and a squadron of *Valentine*, engaged the 26th and “*rather strangely-took over the opponent-just when everyone thought the game was lost, the enemy disengaged.*” From the German side it was held that “*after the fall of darkness (...) Rommel, for some unknown reason, he ordered the withdrawal of the attack on Bir Bu Creimisa*”⁽³⁶⁾.

Rommel had returned to el-Adem by plane in late morning. Was awaited with anxiety, especially from Westphal. “*Not greeting anyone-remembered one of the present-but climbed quietly aboard buses that served as the operations room and looked at the maps. Gause was behind. We tried to make it clear to Gause, nodding, that he would do better to speak to Rommel to explain the decision to Westphal. But it wasn't necessary. Rommel suddenly announced that he was tired and went to lie down*”⁽³⁷⁾. And invoking the *Afrikakorps* did not even wave.

In el-Adem was Bastico. Aware of the long absence of the Commander of the German armored group and of the planned operation, which it was hoped to resolve, had decided to go to see things up close. Not at all sure that Rommel had been made well aware of the overall situation, to prudential measure had placed some units assembled on the line back to Gazala. At the same time had taken care to strengthen the garrison of Ajdabiya, and to monitor the way Balbia. Also had asked Rome the urgent sending thirty crews for medium tanks and 20 for light tanks. The interview with Rommel was clarifying and high hopes for the next day. Whatever hopes, Crüwell was not observing the ideas of his direct superior. Received to the 21 directives about concentric attack, he found that it was too late to change their understanding is summoned to report for the 8 a.m. following the Divisional.

The “*too late*” to Crüwell was to ask in relation to the situation-to his will-during the day. The 21st

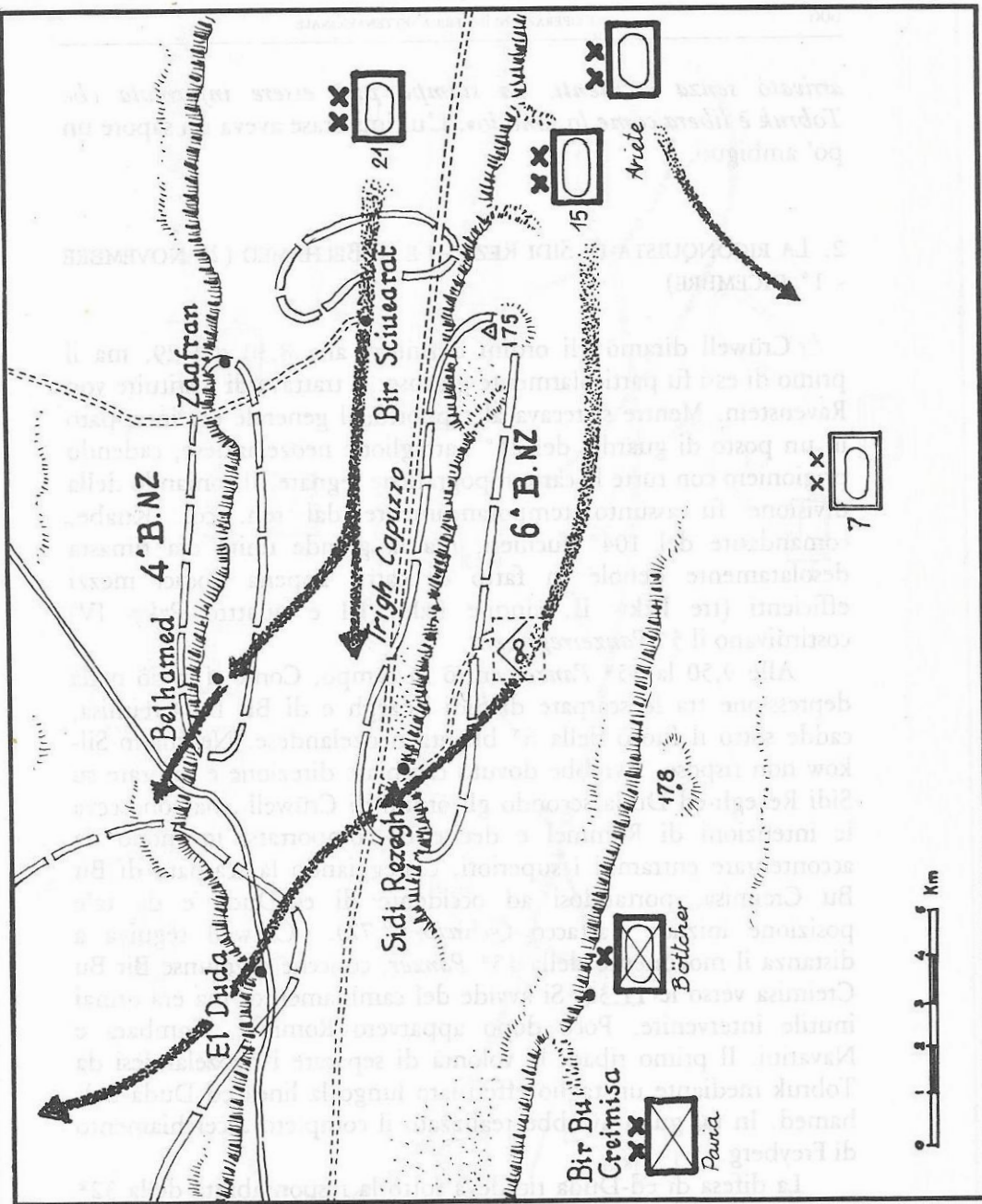
Panzer, proceeding along the Trigh Capuzzo, had arrived at Bir el Chleta-. *Ariete*, arrived at midday at Gasr el Arid-after a break of about three hours had resumed the march to stop at 17:00, a little more to the West. The 15th *Panzer* had left the area of Bir Sciafsciuf at 16:45, divided on two columns. On the right the 15th rifle Brigade had taken South of hill 175 (held by 21st New Zealand battalion), stopping at the head of the Wadi en Nbeidat; left the 8th *PanzerRegiment*, hedging the side exposed to dangers coming from the South with a tank and anti-tank artillery, had gathered in Hareifat en-Nbeidat, i.e. the Eastern foothills of the escarpment to Bir Bu Creimisa. The idea of translating itself into an Crüwell direct action: the 21st along the Trigh Capuzzo with subsequent goals Belhamed and hill 144, on the Axis Road; the 15th South of Trigh on airfield-Sidi Rezegh-ed Duda-Bir Bu Asatein; *Ariete*, moved to the left in the area of Sidi Muftah, to repel armored attacks on the southern flank and on the rear of the German divisions, keeping however able to contribute to action (draft, no. 71).

In the change of position of November 28, the advance of Neumann-Silkow's had been the most eventful. Scott-Cockburn and Gatehouse had been eyeing and were intervene against the 8th Panzer Regiment, though with disappointing results. The 22nd armored brigade had suffered another painful losses, Yes to stay with 24 *Crusader*, half of what it had the day before; the 4th Armored, however, still had about sixty *Stuart*. At dusk, when the 7th Armored Division retired, around the southern flank of the 6th New Zealand Brigade was exposed to German offense.

Incidentally, the advance of the 15th Rifle Brigade had an unexpected consequence. In his motion, the 200th Rifle Regiment was overlooking the escarpment, more or less to the height of the *Wadi* esc-Sciommar; had glimpsed about 200 vehicles astride the Trigh Capuzzo and, thinking supply columns, pushed some element to the North. The supposed logistic units were 13th Corp commands, of the 2nd New Zealand Division and the 1st Armored Brigade. Alerted to the danger, Godwin-Austen decided to retreat to Tobruk with the command of the Corps and the New Zealand services. The withdrawal was completed at 06:30 on November 29 and just in stronghold Godwin-Austen telegraphed to Ritchie: "*The Tobruk corridor is perfectly safe and open to the transit of our troops and this will be kept. They*

IL DISEGNO DI MANOVRA DI CRÜWELL PER L'ANNIENTAMENTO
DELLA 2ª DIVISIONE NEOZELANDESE

Schizzo n. 71



arrived without incident. The press can be informed that Tobruk is free as I am." The last sentence tasted a bit ambiguous.

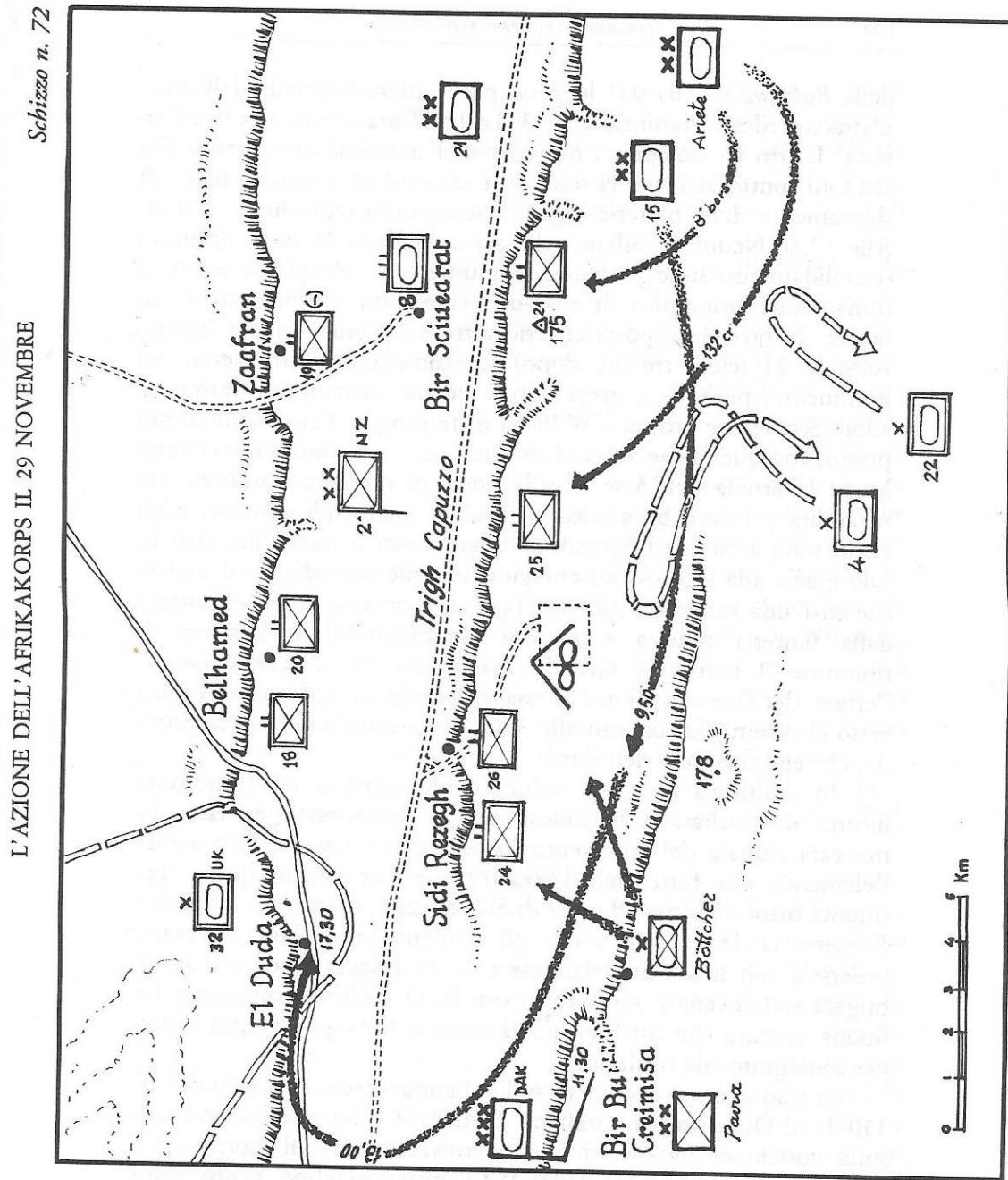
2. THE RECONQUEST OF SIDI REZEGH AND BELHAMED (29 NOVEMBER - 10 DECEMBER)

Crüwell definitive orders sent at 08:30 on the 29th, but the first of them was particularly onerous: it was to replace von Ravenstein. While on his way to the meeting, the General had stumbled into a guard post of the 21st New Zealand battalion, falling prisoner with all maps marked. The command of the Division was temporarily taken over by Leut. Col. Knabe, 104th Rifle Commander, but the army remained desperately weak in tanks the fact is: just twelve efficient means (three Pzkw II, five Pzkw III four Pzkw IV) constituted the 5th *PanzerRegiment*.

At 09:50 the 15th *Panzer* entered the field. As you walked into the trough between the Sidi Rezegh and scarps of Bir Bu Creimisa, came under the fire of the 6th New Zealand Brigade. Neumann-Silkow did not respond. Would have to change direction and focus on Sidi Rezegh-ed Duda according to orders of Crüwell, but knew the intentions of Rommel and decided to behave in such a way as to satisfy both the superiors, along the scarp of Bir Bu Creimisa, taking the West of ed-Duda and from there begin the attack (map No. 72). Crüwell followed the movement of 15th *Panzer* reached the escarpment of Bir Bu Creimisa, toward at 11:30. You could see the change, but it was now pointless to intervene. Shortly after appeared Rommel, Gambarara and Navarini. The first confirmed the will to separate New Zealanders from Tobruk by a cut made along the ed Duda-Belhamed line. In this guise he realized the complete encirclement of Freyberg.

The defense of ed Duda fell under the responsibility of the 32nd tank Brigade. More precisely, his garrison consisted of the I *Essex* battalion, 2/13th Australian battalion, a company of machine Gunners of the 1st *Royal Northumberland* and 4th *Royal Tanks* (reduced to 26 *Matilda*). The 19th New Zealand battalion was moved further north, taking advantage of the vacuum caused by the withdrawal

The action of Afrikakorps on 29 November



of *Bologna* and of the 90th light, to seal the Axis Road. The German attack began at 13:00. The 15th *Panzer* set off with tanks in the vanguard. The collision was violent; the *Essex* was partially destroyed and without more anti-tank guns, but fierce resistance and the barrage of the British batteries arrested the German on hill 150. At 17:30 Neumann-Silkow, which had lost 25 tanks, ordered the consolidation on the positions reached ⁽³⁸⁾. At this point the British commander of ed-Duda demanded a counterattack in his favor, but the reply that he received from the 14th brigade Command at 21:00 (i.e., three hours later) was discouraging: the intervention was imminent, but needed a little more time. Then Scobie encroached who ordered Willison to fend off the attacker as soon as possible, with what he had. The counterattack was launched in a straight line along the axis Road and 2 o'clock at night the situation was restored in favor in the United Kingdom. Since the war the misunderstandings and mistakes are much more frequent than we imagine, it was only thanks to the vigorous and energetic Australian and English that ed-Duda reaction was entirely shot. The impact had been born by the German infantry and while Neumann-Silkow planned to renew the attempt, by mass with the 8th *PanzerRegiment*, incorrect deciphering of a radio message him to retreat towards el Adem. It was only at 03:30, under the command of *Panzergruppe*, that he was aware of the error.

Ultimately the move desired by Rommel had proved ineffective and results dangerous for the overall situation. The failure of the intervention wear out the 15th *Panzer*, i.e. the strongest element of the *Afrikakorps*, and this remained all day west of Sidi Rezegh, while to the East the 21st *Panzer* and the *Ariete*, that is to say the weaker elements, had to contend with the 2nd Canadian and the 1st tank Brigade, with the 1st South African Brigade and the 7th Armored Division. It was good fortune that Ritchie failed to make every effort to achieve that result.

You can now complete the abandonment without hill 150 ed-Duda from Italian side. If the II/66th infantry had remained on the position, perhaps you would have found the 29th and *probably* the 15th *Panzer* would have had a different outcome. On the other hand, it is not said that he would be able to resist a British attempt to even conquer hill 150 to improve local defense. In addition, until the morning of the 29 no one could know that the 15th *Panzer* would try the

conquest of ed-Duda. On balance, it does not appear that you can argue that despite undoubted mistake has exercised on the economy of the second battle of Sidi Rezegh a stronger weight of marabuto abandoned by Boettcher, for example, or the initiative of Neumann-Silkow contrary to the thought of Crüwell.

The 2nd New Zealand Division had settled the better to withstand the expected stress of the *Afrikakorps*. At around 10:30 the 21st *Panzer* had started the blind attack between Zaafran and hill 175, but without managing to conclude a lot. What all the New Zealanders waited with growing anxiety was the arrival of the 1st South African Brigade, however just that morning Norrie had complicated things. At 06:00 had sent a communication to Pienaar and ordered extreme caution: the Brigade was not to abandon Hagfet en-Nadura until explorers had ensured that the movement could not be accomplished in full tranquility. In addition, until the junction with the New Zealanders the Brigade remained employed by 30th Corp. Norrie had amended the provisions of the 8th Army, but was forced by the situation, which was reconstructed on the basis of the information received, the 21st *Panzer* marching on Trigh Capuzzo, over Bir el Chleta-: *Ariete*, further back, to the South and parallel to Trigh directed also against Freyberg “from Southeast”; the 15th *Panzer* with his right hand towards the airfield of Sidi Rezegh. Pienaar was already so unwilling to run adventures that are immobilized while waiting for events.

For, the 7th Armored Division to make a broader speech. It was collected in the area of Charrubet ez-Zghemat when, at 09:45, a patrol of 4th South African armored car armored column spotted West of Carmuset en-Nbeidat. It was, of course, of the 15th *Panzer*, which was followed until his linkup with Boettcher and further prosecution to ed Duda. More or less at the same time the 4th Armored Brigade had a short but intense clash with a column of the *Ariete*. When it became clear that Rommel had divided the armored forces into two blocs, Norrie is turned to a massive intervention. Though he missed the target. Would assemble the two brigades, the support group and the South African Brigade and literally crush the *Ariete* first and then the 21st *Panzer*, but none of this was attempted. At 13:00 the command of 30th Corp received news that ed Duda and hill 175 were attacked and that tanks

Germans were gathering on the Sidi Rezegh airfield. Between true information and baseless news, Gott was posted on the battlefield, while the British long-range batteries advocated and opened fire. The intention of Gott was to bind with the artillery the enemy units to the West of the airport and throwing with the tanks on the forces north of Sidi Muftah. At 14:00 the 4th Armored Brigade had arrived South of the eastern end of the Bir Bu Creimisa escarpment, while the 22nd, on his right, stopped perceiving Northeast a column of 25 Italian tanks. The orders were for the 4th Armored to head on hill 175, and for the 22nd to cover the exposed flank of 4th. You came to the collision but in an atmosphere of confusion.

At dusk on the 28th the *Ariete* had received from Ciriwell to take since that same evening towards Sidi Muftah for it to carry out its tasks, but note the need to reorganize and supply pushed to dawn to await Balotta. So, at first light of the 29th, the Division had taken the journey on two widely separated mixed columns: right that based on 8th bersaglieri, left based on the 132nd tank. At about 09:30 132nd tank column was in the area of Sidi Muftah, understood in sense very side. Had to do with a group opponent and freed without giving much importance to the episode. The opposite of what he had to do the enemy, i.e. the 4th armored brigade, which numerically superior, as appears to have undergone a "brushind" ⁽³⁹⁾. Apparently unaware of the damage caused, the *Ariete* moved north. In the early afternoon had a meeting with the 7th armored. It is not clear the dynamics of events, the fact is that soon, suffered another tear; the two British armored brigades withdrew on Charrubet ez-Zghemat. At this point, Balotta received order from *Afrikakorps* going to seal the Trigh Capuzzo at Bir Sciuearat - hill 175. Consequently, hill 175 was assigned which the objective to the 8th bersaglieri and hill 167 (West of Rugbet en-Nbeidat) to the 132nd Tank.

On hill 175 had arranged for some time the 21st New Zealand battalion, but between 10:00 and 14:00 hours it had to dismiss a couple of assaults of the German 104th Rifle regiment; also the 8th *Royal Tanks*, which supported the Battalion had lost all his *Valentine*. Around 15:30 an isolated armored cars arrived from the South and he introduced himself to Gen. Barrowclough informing them that the 1st South African Brigade was marching. Is human that

when the New Zealanders waited impatiently for reinforcement, so that when at 17:00 were spotted some armored vehicles was easy the misunderstanding between the high towers of the M 13 and the outline of South African armored cars. It was 8th bersaglieri. Stopped briefly, then went with the V battalion reinforced in the first Echelon and III, reinforced, too, in the second, supported by the I and II/132nd artillery. The attack was launched almost of momentum and the 21st New Zealand battalion was overwhelmed, losing 200 prisoners, discovering a field Health Center with a thousand patients and 400 men of health personnel. Also 200 prisoners of the German 21st *Panzerdivision* were freed. At the same time the second column of *Ariete*, based on the 132nd Tank, had occupied hill 167 of Baten Bel Cor a new surprising and capturing other prisoners.

Pienaar was remained all day waiting for the “*all clear*”. At 18:25 received a message from the 30 Corp: “*Are now commanded by Bernard [Freyberg], but Biggest Neptune [Ritchie] want to absolutely reach Bernard tonight.*” The goal of the South Africans had been indicated initially in hill 178 on the edge of Bir Bu Creimisa, yes it will feel like Rommel's winding element from the South. The first order of Freyberg (17:30 hours approximately) was hurrying towards hill 175 to lend a hand at 21st battalion fiercely engaged. Half an hour later came the news of the fall of hill 175 and Pienaar found no circumstances better than inform Norrie a countermand of Freyberg⁽⁴⁰⁾ and to remain where he was. Ultimately, the only unit to close in on the day was the *Ariete*.

At the conclusion of the fighting, at 20:00 sustained the *Panzergruppe* sent out orders for the next day. The aim to be achieved was twofold: to hamper enemy units full junction outside Tobruk with the garrison of the fort and make even more balance the encirclement of the New Zealanders in the area of Sidi Rezegh. To this end the 15th *Panzer* would have renewed the attack on ed Duda until Belhamed and occupy for making contact with the 90th Light; the 21st *Panzer* was facing the front Zaalran hill 175, straddling the Trigh Capuzzo; the Boettcher retained possession of Bir Bu Creimisa against attempts by the South and the *Ariete* connection work between hill 175 and Bir Bu Creimisa Escarpment. As for the siege belt, the Trento had the task of pushing a small tactical unit in the direction of Bir Bu Asatein, trying to narrow down the

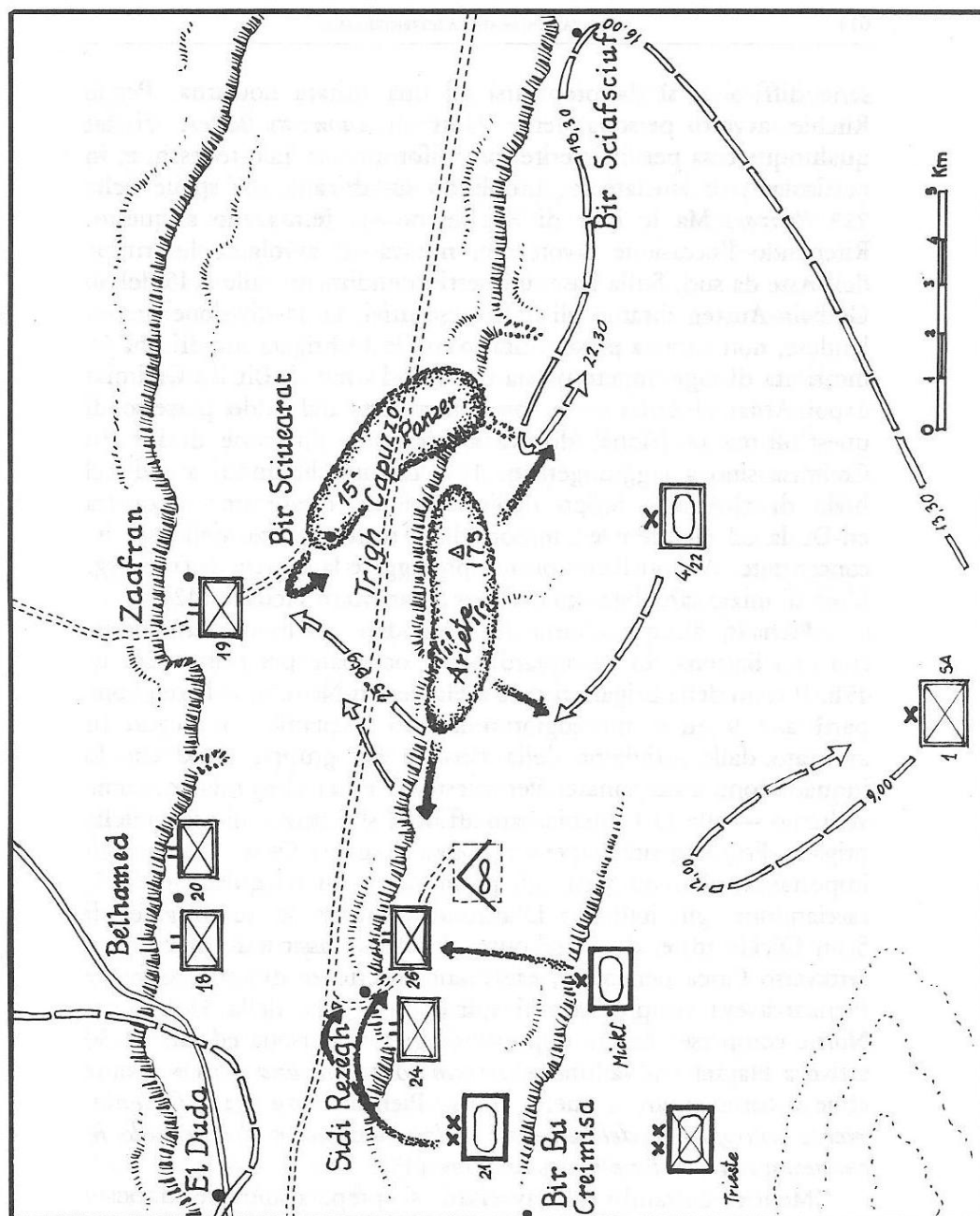
gap opened by the British 70th Division, and on the North by Belgasseem, *Bologna* would have done the same. Finally the *Trieste* passes to the direction of the *Panzergruppe* orders, including the De Meo Recon Group and German 33rd Recon Group. At 06:30 a.m. the next day to be collected Southwest of Bir Bu Creimisa ⁽⁴¹⁾, so at night the responsibility of his sector would be assumed by the III/19th and I/40th infantry with the III/1st rapid artillery, under the command of *Pavia*.

Shortly after 08:00 of 30 November Rommel arrived at Bir Bu Creimisa, where he was placed in command of the *Afrikakorps*. Crüwell welcomed him rather doubtful. The 21st *Panzer* seemed more or less blocked, for both the resistance encountered on the Trigh Capuzzo, for both practical and growing threat behind it. The 15th was recovering from a setback not indifferent. The *Ariete* if the happened to fared well against the 7th armored Division, but objectively you couldn't expect much more from its means. In essence, although *Trento* had resumed at dawn a few strongpoints the garrison of Tobruk in order to reduce the gap between Bir Bu Asatein and Sidi Belgasseem, the encirclement had well unlikely to succeed. Rommel could make mistakes like any other General but undeniably had a fortitude and a trust if uncommon. As you well aware of walking on the razor's edge, and not just from that day, confirmed without hesitation the directives already issued and considered a new hypothesis. As the decisive factor for the purposes of mass enemy semicircle destruction had possession of the Sidi Rezegh escarpment, this goal could be achieved simultaneously from *Ariete* from the East and by Mickl from Southwest (Leut. Col. Mickl had assumed command from the Boettcher and Gen. Boettcher as the 21st *Panzer*), with the support of the available Army and Corps artillery. Actually they were sent orders in adherence to these instructions-which is mentioned in the war diary of the *Afrikakorps*-because Crüwell, seen as you put things, remained at the initial operating concept (sketch No. 73).

Ritchie also examined carefully the operating problem. On the evening of 29th had learned from wiretaps that the 21st *Panzer* was to take possession of the Sidi Rezegh escarpment and that the *Ariete* had clashed vividly with the bulk of the 7th Armored Division, but the picture taken was a bit too optimistic. According to the command of the 8th Army the two divisions were in

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serious difficulties, in order to prepare for a nighttime retreat. So Ritchie warned Gott's "not to let go" of saying anything to interfere with the Italian-German supplies and, in particular, to launch South African armored car behind the 21st *Panzer*. But Ritchie's ideas do not stop at this. Considering the favorable opportunity, aimed to turn axis troops from the South. Based on these understandings, at 08:45 on the 30th Godwin-Austen sent out executive orders: the 2nd New Zealand Division, soon contacted the 1st South African Brigade-tasked with reaching first hill 178 West of Bir Bu Creimisa and then Abiar el-Amar-e was certain of the balance holding the latter position, had to attack in the direction of Bir Bu Creimisa until hill 177, five kilometres south of the crossroads of el-Adem. Purpose of the operation: create a Pocket between ed Duda and el-Adem and bottle up all axis forces concentrated there. In Gott's task is to protect the left of Freyberg. The start time would have been termed the arrival of Pienaar⁽⁴²⁾.

Pienaar, therefore, began to send back a battalion with a battery, in vanguard, to occupy first hill 178. The rest of the Brigade remained at Hagfet en-Nadura. The battalion departed at 09:00 and noon sighted the enemy or better was sighted by the artillery of *Pavia* and Mickl Group the framed with cannon fire. For this and other reasons, as we shall see-at 13:00 was recalled to met with the bulk of the Brigade. Freyberg was unsure what to think. By hill 178 didn't care anything; what he wanted was to recapture hill 175, expelling the Italians. Moreover, even if Scott's brigades-Cockburn and Gatehouse were to ensure the transit through the danger zone, there were uncertain of various kinds and Pienaar had always before my eyes the end of 5th Brigade. Norrie realized that it was appropriate to act in person and arrived at 11:30 Hagfet en-Nadura "*determined to give a shock.*" As he had to comment after the war, "*Pienaar was not sufficiently aware of the urgency of the situation or dangerous condition of the New Zealand Division*"⁽⁴³⁾.

While both were opponents, the opposing artillery had taken the floor. The *Ariete* is seen early in the morning is subject of New Zealand battery pulls, whereby, in addition to responding to fire, 132nd Tank was instructed to go to the airfield to decrease the concentration of media and ward off enemy observers. Initially, the contact is limited

for a more or less intense exchange of cannon fire, but soon took on a different look. The 7th Armored Division was given the task to seize every opportunity to attack and destroy the enemy, and to protect the 1st South African Brigade in its advance northwards. Since everything was somewhat defensive character, Gott decided to concentrate all efficient tanks in one hand. Scott-Cockburn spent his 25 *Crusader* to Gatehouse and the 4th armored brigade, with reinforcements of material received, put it thus on line 120 tanks.

However, it had an absolutely top media complex, it was the *Ariete* to take more aggressive attitude. At about 09:30 a point of the VIII Tank battalion against the right of Gatehouse provoked a clash of three-quarters of an hour. At noon the 4th armored brigade was to invest the VIII and IX battalions of the 132nd Tank; This time it was a real combat, supported by artillery, intense participation lasted up to about 16:00. From Italian side was declared to have place out 25 *tanks* for the British part 16 M13 tanks. Pulling the money, no matter how urgent it was committed to the Gatehouse and exclusively directed against the *Ariete*, the result null manifested: the 8th bersaglieri retained possession of hill 175 and the 132nd tank, despite having suffered losses in especially in the VIII battalion, repressed English attempts and remained on the West and southwest of the position.

It was problematic to allow South Africans to arrive unharmed until only a short distance from hill 175, then regain it, was clear to Norrie. While Pienaar recalled the boost towards Bir Bu Creimisa escarpment, he spoke with radio and Freyberg explained that, having regard to the local situation, it became preferable to direct the 1st South African Brigade on Bir Sciafsciuf-eleven kilometers east of hill 175-from where it could attack the goal. Freyberg shared solution and between 13:00 and 13:30 Pienaar finally set in motion, accompanied by Norrie, who preferred to be present to eliminate any new debate about the dangers of the movement. At 16:00 the battalion head touched Bir Sciafsciuf.

The entry into the field of German divisions did not take place that afternoon. Back to Bir Bu Creimisa to about 13:30, Rommel examined again using the *Afrikakorps*, now ready to go. In the end he decided that at 15:30 the 15th *Panzer* and the Mickl Group attack the escarpment Sidi Rezegh, while the 90th

slight move against Belhamed and Zaafran. The *Ariete* would keep the positions held and possibly would boost even further westward on the slope, while the 21st *Panzer* of Boettcher would repeat attempts astride the Trigh Capuzzo's from the East. Crüwell asked unnecessarily to postpone an hour early, but gained the 15th *Panzer*, superseded Abiar el-Amar, you ran it on Belhamed to make connection with the 90th Light, which confined itself to his mind, such method an action of the commitment. However the attack did not begin until 15:45 due to a violent and precise British aerial bombardment. Neumann-Silkow, which fielded 40 tanks, had long since taken North of Bir Bu Creimisa. After half an hour of artillery preparation-judged unsatisfactory by the Germans and deadly by New Zealanders – left the base with the 8th *PanzerRegiment* in the lead, followed by the 200th infantry regiment and 33rd *Panzerjaeger* Bn. Mickl had to widen the effort on the right. The clash was decided and violent. A tank battalion took the momentum off of Abiar el-Amar, descending on the Trigh Capuzzo; the bulk of the column bent eastward against the 24th and 26th New Zealand battalion. At the same time *Ariete* kept the 25th battalion under pressure. The sudden fall of the shadows of the evening did suspend the fight: the battalion that had passed the Trigh was arrested by the barrage of enemy batteries, but the 6th Brigade remained very little, so much so that Barrowclough proposed to withdraw the survivors into Tobruk. Freyberg spoke with Godwin-Austen, but 13 Corps Commander responded that the South Africans had to resume hill 175 that night with the help of the Brigade by Gatehouse.

The 21st *Panzer*, for its part, had done its best, compatibly with residual efficiency. The 5th *PanzerRegiment* could count on about twenty tanks and 104th Rifle had also suffered losses. On the other hand there was the New Zealand rearguard-nine tanks of 44th *Royal Tanks* with some anti-tank guns and little infantry-but fears were not in the resistance that it opposed, but the threat that loomed from the South and East, by the 4th armored brigade and *Jock Columns*. Then at the end of the afternoon the situation remained about the initial and at dusk the machinegun battalion of the 104th Rifle had to be sent in support of the 3rd Recon Bn for esc-Sciomar Hagfet.

At 17.45 Rommel returned to command of the *Afrikakorps* and

established for the next day: "*Mark and annihilate the enemy pockets, starting at 06:00.*" In the hours following the influx of news from different areas of the battlefield. At 19:45 Boettcher reported that 21st *Panzer* had been like them to give on the flank and rear to be in serious difficulties, whatever the tactical attitude to be taken the following day, therefore requested the convenience of gathering the *Afrikakorps* at Bir Bu Creimisa. The communication had been made to the *Panzergruppe*, which demanded information. Crüwell, hit for failing to comply with hierarchical, said openly to Rommel that if the 21st couldn't do attack it defend itself, much less could think of fight their way westward, so had to stay where it was. In this order of ideas, at 22:00 responded harshly to Boettcher: "*He depends exclusively on me. Radio messages to the Panzergruppe, especially if clear, are prohibited. You must resist at any cost. Stay at stronghold, with Division command at a central position*". In command of the *Afrikakorps* was convinced that the loss of von Ravenstein was a blow to the morale of the Division, but it is undeniable that this position was dramatic.

Around 22:00 Neumann-Silkow got in touch, ensuring that Sidi Rezegh was firmly in German hands, but assuming the 15th *Panzer* was nailed on the Trigh Capuzzo. Also in this regard Crüwell expressed dissatisfaction. In his view it was necessary to extend the territorial occupation North of Trigh, at least with the infantry, taking advantage of darkness. Considering the defenses of ed-Duda and Belhamed, this would have spared losses Neumann-Silkow, however, preferred to postpone the continuation of the attack at dawn, to enjoy the full support of artillery and tanks and Crüwell came to agree.

The *Ariete* closed the day rejecting a last enemy effort: the South Africans. To tell the truth was also fortunate because Pienaar, attaching a communication from Freyberg that wasn't likely a strong Italian opposition on hill 175- communication ignored by Norrie, who was in radio contact with Freyberg - at 18:30 set to carry out the task entrusted to it. Evidently thinking of were unimportant, matter started two small groups tactics: the first, consisting of the *Royal Natal Carbineers* (less one company), left; the second consists of a single company of the *Duke of Edinburgh's own Rifles*. At this low power of one he added a very limited coordination of the effort, so the attack ran aground

as was seen in the North, the German 3rd Recon Bn direct on esc-Sciomar Wadi. At 20:15 Pienaar urged the conquest of goal, but the right tactical group stopped as soon as the head of the *Wadi* was addressed a large fire of machine guns (21:45 hours) and the left-wing group stopped at the appearance of a M 13 tank company (22:15 hours). This ended the attempt to occupy South hill 175.

As regards the German-Italian forces north of Belhamed, had been translated into a plan to regain lost positions between the via Balbia and Axis Road. The intentions were not the *Panzergruppe* annihilation of Freyberg. You wanted to try to cut the salient of ed-Duda acting from the Southwest (with the *Trento*) and northeast (with *Bologna* and especially with the 90th Light). An operation was scheduled, ad hoc for the night on 1 December. The *Trento* had to rotate their right (Lombardi Group) to resume three pillars in the area of Bir Bu Asatein, and protect them immediately. On the other side was scheduled a preliminary stage by the *Bologna* to be concluded not later than 22:00: detect the German garrisons of a few strongpoints and open gates for the attack-in-depth. Would follow a breaking phase carried out by the 90th Light and a third phase of successful completion from the *Bologna*. However the plan never came into being at 20:00, when Sümmermann announced to Gloria that a serious threat loomed from Gambut area and called for a reinforced company to establish a stronghold in the East of the Axis Road. So the question was postponed.

Finally, the *Trieste* is fielded in the southern edge of Bir Bu Creimisa with northeast-southwest trend and cornerstones of a battalion. In the extreme South was a recon grouping.

Shortly before 02:00 on 1 December two officers New Zealand reached the command of the 1st South African Brigade. Zaafran, and came from an urgent message of Freyberg: "*Sidi Rezegh was occupied by the enemy this morning. If you do not resume before dawn of 1 December, our position becomes untenable. You must therefore fulfill this task*". The officers were that the serious losses were caused mainly by German armored units. Pienaar turned to Norrie, still exists, and he decided that at the end of the day be renewed the attack on hill 175 with extreme force and later

the action moved towards Sidi Rezegh. Even Godwin-Austen was concerned. At 02:30 had asked Ritchie the intervening of 7th Armored Division; later, at 07:55, expressed even more clearly: If the 1st South Africa had not arrived at Sidi Rezegh and the 4th armored had not prevented a new German attack, he would be forced to withdraw within the perimeter of Tobruk all troops who had opened up the corridor, although decided-upon-to retain possession of Belhamed and ed-Duda (sketch No. 74).

Towards 01:00 at night the 15th *Panzer* had received orders for the final act of the battle, but as far as the New Zealand Division had reported heavy losses and was shocked ⁽⁴⁴⁾, it was still able to put a far from negligible resistance. Neumann-Silkow established to overcome the Trigh Capuzzo during darkness, then at first light with the 200th infantry would be stated on the southern slopes of Belhamed and 8th *PanzerRegiment* was raided on the position. The action began at about 06:30, prepared and supported by a strong artillery fire, and was not much history. At 08:30 the fight was virtually complete. The 18th New Zealand battalion, fellback West over the Axis Road, rejoining the forces of Willison and the 20th surrendered.

The New Zealanders were now divided into two blocs. Zaafran had found refuge in the Division Command and the remains of the 4th Brigade and the 4th *Royal Tanks*; on the Escarpment of Sidi Rezegh, East of marabuto, and on its northern slopes, there was what remained of the 6th Brigade. The aid was expected by the latter due to location, and was considered so crucial from hope to restore the previous situation or nearly so. Indeed the 4th armored brigade put in line 115 tanks and his intervention was provided by Got en-Nbeidat to the Northwest, in the East of the airfield, for "*counterattack the enemy tanks at all costs.*" At 08:00, Gatehouse then pushed forward, 5th *Royal Tanks* to make contact with the 6th Brigade of Barrowclough and receive information and guidance for effective cooperation. Although hampered by artillery fire of the *Pavia* to the left, the *Ariete* to the right and the Mickl group, advanced front developed without excessive difficulty, managing to come to cause considerable disturbance to *Trieste*. However a series of misunderstandings quickly lose force her.

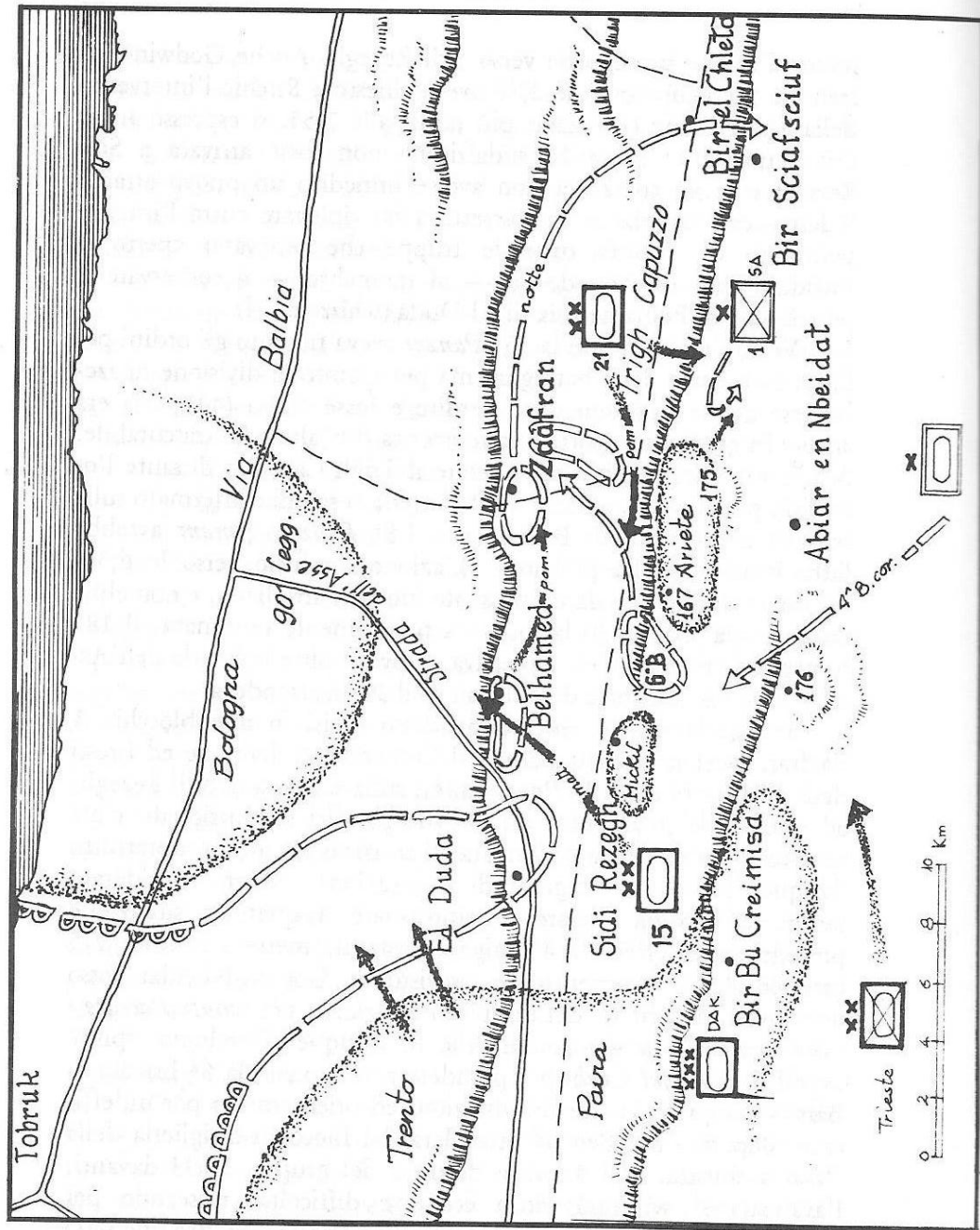
Barrowclough was happy of the junction and immediately emphasized as the only appearance of 4th armored brigade had

The events of 1 December

A

Schizzo n. 74

GLI AVVENIMENTI DEL 1° DICEMBRE



dismayed and heartened by the remains of its units; so he declared himself ready to proceed against Sidi Rezegh. Preliminary agreements were taken, when in command of the 4th armored brigade arrived a radio message from Gott directed to the New Zealand with a withdrawal order. The commanders of tank regiments are tended, therefore, to cover a retreat towards the Southeast. Barrowclough obviously opposed: regretting the positions, intended to point East to rejoin to Freyberg. New objection: hill 175 was held and controlled the route of retreat. To make a long story short, the exhausted and New Zealand headed towards are disheartened Zaafran and Gatehouse, having stayed some time in the area to secure their release, at 13:30 began the return to Bir Berraneb.

At noon the situation loomed very unfavorable for the 8th Army: the strength of Freyberg changed in the retreat of remnants to Zaafran; the attack of Gatehouse failed and ended with the surrender of the field battle; the renewed attempt by Pienaar against hill there 175 against the head of *Wadi* esc-Sciomar, where they had placed the 3rd Recon Bn, the German II/104th infantry and outposts of *Ariete* ⁽⁴⁵⁾.

When, in the early afternoon, the command of 30 Corp intercepted a message of Godwin-Austen at Gott, with whom the first passed under the second South African Brigade, Norrie he argues that Godwin-Austen was resigned to the abandonment of the “*corridor*” of Tobruk ⁽⁴⁶⁾. Therefore resolved not to move the South Africans (who, incidentally, he had continued to consider their orders) until New Zealanders weren't released out of the bag and Freyberg invited to fight their way towards the East that night to reach Bir Sciafsciuf.

Even Crüwell had also spoken at noon with the 15th *Panzer* successful completion: to continue the action towards Zaafran, encircle New Zealand remains and make connection with the 21st *Panzer*. The attack of 8th *Panzerregiment*, hampered even before it starts from an air raid was launched at 16:30. The 200th infantry regiment, who had blocked below the opposing lines, free pass to left tanks, but we see that the task was born under a bad Star: at 17:15 an order of *Panzergruppe* concerning the 21st *Panzer* was held at 15th and at 18:00 he stood where he was, that is three kilometers from Zaafran. This unexpected favorable mishap

It took New Zealand to escape from the meshes of the net. Had many concerns about encirclement. At about 16:00, in fact, Freyberg had declared incapacitated if they had not been put off because the nine *Panzer* spotted on his path of retreat. Did not know that the concentration in New Zealand at Zaafran was distending the 21st *Panzer* to advance westwards along the Trigh Capuzzo, to join with the Mickl Group at Sidi Rezegh and join with the 15th. Freyberg had before him the door open. A long New Zealand column (a thousand vehicles) left at 18:00, Zaafran came to Bir Gibni before sunrise and continued towards Baggush to return to Egypt. The 1st South African Brigade remained in place until night, then dropped off too. .

The Constitution of the sack (conquest of Belhamed) and annihilation had been entrusted to Crüwell, which had employed 15th, 21st *Panzer*, *Ariete* and part of the 90th Light. But Rommel had wanted to, in a certain manner, tighten the ring with the *Trieste*. To understand the story of the early days of December-events which originated a strong friction between Rommel and some Italian commanders, with a result of accusations and controversy-it is necessary to present the bad habit of Rommel to give direct orders to without bothering to notify divisional commanders of the Army Corps; the continuous passage of dependencies of some Italian units; the low efficiency of transmission, resulting in vast uncertainties on the overall situation; the note continued fluctuation of fighting in the desert. All this basically joined-as has been seen, on the one hand and on the other-errors and hesitations of commanders.

At about 5 o'clock in the morning the *Panzergruppe* had communicated to the command of the XXI Copr that Gen. Piazzoni and Fernandez were summoned at 07:00 to Bir Bu Creimisa for a conference with Rommel, and *Trieste* was to be ready to move on trucks “*from 07:30 onwards*”⁽⁴⁷⁾. At the time of the two Italian generals presented themselves at the observation post of *Afriakorps*. Orders, minutes, Rommel's are not known because there is no trace of them in any historical journal; However, apparently resulted in prescribing the placement of the *Trieste* at the head of Rugbet en-Nbeidat within the dusk and the firmer hold of the Escarpment of Bir Bu Creimisa by the *Pavia*. The latter order was completed shortly after a call from Gause: “*the possibility looms of a different commitment of the Trieste*”⁽⁴⁸⁾, the role of

Army Reserve was entrusted to a tactical group, motorized battalion level, which was set up by the *Pavia* at noon and have the own right, instead of *Trieste*. As the task of Piazzoni? Do not know exactly. It was stated that Rommel wanted to “*close the outlet southwards with the CAM*”⁽⁴⁹⁾, but this hypothesis does not hold because the *Trieste* was to move south of hill 175 and hill 167 of Baten Bel Cor, held by *Ariete*, by the evening, so I would play any part in the concrete operation that Rommel wanted to end the day. On the other hand the encirclement was already in place. Instead, Rommel probably reserved the right to issue further orders: there was plenty of time to see how things were. It remains to ask why he had not informed Gambarà, charging him to coordinate the action of the two divisions of the CAM, now reunited.

After the report, Piazzoni returned to his Command and at 08:00 sent the order of motion. Just then while the 5th *Royal Tanks*, the element at the head of the 4th Armored Brigade, he initiated towards the airfield of Sidi Rezegh. A short distance would have been followed by 8th Hussars and 3rd *Royal Tanks*. As a result, at about 09:00 saw the 66th infantry parading in front of him, a few kilometers away, the British Armored column and at 09:25 Piazzoni decided to suspend the movement just started to assume an attitude defensive temporarily with projected as first artillery as possible. During the doldrums, Rommel reached the *Trieste* and clashed with Piazzoni for slowness with which executed orders. These evidently tried to explain the situation, but he ordered the resumption of the advance towards the Northeast with some slight modification compared to the initial device. The left column (66th infantry, III/21st artillery and I group of 105) under the command of Gen. Azzi was to make contact with the *Ariete* Northwest of Abiar en-Nbeidat; the right (9th bersaglieri and II/21st artillery) keep watch measure exposed flank; the Follini grouping (65th infantry and I/21st artillery) was to follow the Azzi column at a quarter of an hour away. Closed the rearguard. But a snag arose again. Divisional recon units clash against enemy elements (a *Jock Column*, probably) and soon a violent and extensive artillery fire began to beat Italian columns, which had to stop and get off again by trucks. This time Piazzoni decided to stop and assume a defensive deployment,

the warning was ordered both the *Panzergruppe* and the Corps of Maneuver.

It may be that Piazzoni was excessively cautious, but is to be proven. In fact, it seems hard to dispute the danger that had to emerge at a poorly motorized infantry units to go into the desert to meet *known* enemy armored units, who already had been sighted. It was also accused of having left open the passage through which escaped the New Zealanders, but the accusation is clearly based on bad information facts: Freyberg escaped from Zaafran eastward and then to Bir Sciafsciuf, taking advantage of the 21st *Panzer* advance along the Trigh Capuzzo. Although in the evening the *Trieste* was found at the head of Rugbet en-Nbeidat, would not have been able to influence events in the slightest.

In abandoning the expatriation area south of Bir Bu Creimisa escarpment, the *Trieste* had left in place De Meo recon grouping, passed under the orders of the *Pavia*. At 12:30 Fernandez named Col. De Meo and gave him, by order of Rommel, the post a offensive against Bir Berraneb, where it was believed to be a big English depot. The grouping was eleven miles southwest of Bir Bu Creimisa and had to overcome some thirty miles of desert. He left at 14:00 and a little less than two hours after he arrived in tactical contact with the opponent. Had just opened fire, which emerged from the *clouds* a strong German air formation. Despite the flag-waving and white rocket, aircraft passed about grouping like a whirlwind: forty killed and wounded (including eight officers), the 100 mm battery destroyed, half of the pieces of 65 damaged, an armored car on fire with all the crew, most of the damaged vehicles. Ultimately, the unit had to return to base to be complete put back in place.

Rommel felt full of confidence. Tobruk was isolated again, and the whole area of Sidi Rezegh was in the hands of the axis. The loot was considerable; 814 tanks and armored cars incapacitate, 127 aircraft destroyed, more than 9,000 prisoners (including three generals), huge quantities of weapons, materials and vehicles captured. His intentions for the 2 December aimed to rake the area South-East of Tobruk and push the vanguards towards the front of Sollum. Therefore the 21st *Panzer* was to send a tactical group

along the Trigh Capuzzo towards Sidi Azeiz; the 15th would have proceeded to eliminate the remaining New Zealanders and then resistance to send also a tactical group along the via Balbia to Bardia; the Corps of Maneuver and 90th Light were instead directed towards Sidi Omar to surround the enemy. However he had to take into account some braking factors. The *Afrikakorps* was really tired. In those few days of the end of November had lost 3,800 men, including sixteen unit commanders; 142 tanks, of which 25 Pzkw IV, on initial 249; 25 armored cars; 41 artillery pieces, 34 anti-tank guns and 18 88 pieces; 60 mortars and approximately 400 vehicles. The fuel and ammunition ran low and many tanks were in urgent need of repairs of various kinds. A curious incident-symptomatic of how realistic was the appreciation of the situation also to lower-may well end the day on December 1. The Commander of the 20th New Zealand battalion, wounded at Belhamed, recalled that a German officer in passing said:

"We have retaken Belhamed our groups and, East and West have established the link" I expressed my regret. "This is not the case; We have lost the battle " - he replied. "I'm pleased. It was a pleasure to meet you. You fought well " I said "It is not enough. Our losses are too heavy. We have lost the battle", replied and walked away" ⁽⁵⁰⁾.

3. THE BATTLE OF BIR-EL GOBI (2-7 DECEMBER).

Although Rommel had in mind to continue to keep the foot on the accelerator, December 2 was a day of settling. It was not simply a reorganization of units (the task to restore the efficiency of the recon group was frantic) and to assume a certain displacement units (the *Trieste* completed the transfer in the afternoon South of hill 175). There was also Rome's half.

In the capital the situation evolve was followed with apprehension. The memory of the collapse of the tenth Army burned again. As soon as the British offensive began, Mussolini had entered into turmoil. He was given operational command to Rommel; had sent telegrams of incitement to Bastico, Rommel and Gambara; each element attracted his attention. The reporting of an enemy troop South of el-Mechili had induced

Cavallero to reiterate the invitation to "*be better informed on the importance individual episodes, your assessment and action*" ⁽⁵¹⁾. The undoubted interest of Comando Supremo in the theatre of Libyan operations, therefore, sometimes manifested itself in questions and not always stresses 'centered', which consider the characteristics of armored battle swings of the fight. Bastico, which already bear the pain ease with which Rommel had left the command of *Panzergruppe*, also because this absence is a definite bearing on the situational awareness, could only be bothered by certain messages from Rome. Now, for example, you work clearly showed concerns over the strength of the blockade of Tobruk ⁽⁵²⁾, now about the garrison of Bir el-Goi? ⁽⁵³⁾, or for the opponent and infiltration in the backline ⁽⁵⁴⁾. All asking, implicitly or explicitly, 'insurance' by taking the appropriate measures to avert the danger. Usually the Comando Superiore answered generically, but when responded by pointing out that the measure and meaning most appropriate – i.e. the material means-had to come from Italy, then applied the surprised bureaucratic reproach:

“After your insurance and numerous requests on area situation pre-*gebel* and live recommendations for surveillance and reconnaissance, implementation is now suddenly telegram No 20224/Op. today that means demand it is failed to send in a short time. Given better situation and items in determining it. UGO Cavallero” ⁽⁵⁵⁾.

The question concerned 150 armored cars and 300 light vehicles Wherever to trim down the British mechanized patrols, and the alleged impossibility to send 'shortly'-almost the impossible had not existed when the request had been submitted before-is really poorly placed: since the previous year Graziani had urged the sending of armored cars and special vehicles to the desert!

On 30 November, however, Cavallero was sent to Gen. Von Rintelen a strange note:

“Duce want to know by General Rommel as follows:

1st - his judgment on the situation;

2nd -his intentions for the further conduct of the battle.

Please indulge communicate that desire of the Duce to General Rommel”⁻⁽⁵⁶⁾.

Rommel replied immediately:

"I intend to restore the situation and therefore to maintain the investment of Tobruk and sweep the enemy completely the opposite of Sollum. Our forces, especially the German divisions, after a bitter and bloody battle 14 days of relentlessly, were diminished appreciably. Therefore a continuous and guaranteed influx of weapons and logistical materials (in particular fuel and ammunition) is essential even in the case that the battle continued. In order to repel future and renewed British attacks, need for a ready supply of other armored divisions and important air forces.

After the arrival of these reinforcements and supplies which also depends on the capture of Tobruk". ⁽⁵⁷⁾

But even Bastico had notified Rome your thought. In his view the progress of the operations was taking on the characteristics of war of attrition. News taken from captives, wire-tapping, various information and surveys on how to conduct the struggle from the British side, everything seemed to confirm the intention to wear down the enemy axis forces, put them in a crisis of supply and buy time for the influx of reinforcements from the Empire. So to deal with that eventuality needed armored units, armored cars, medium-caliber artillery, link media, special vehicles to cover the losses and increase the offensive and defensive capabilities of axis troops. Meanwhile need the battalions of tanks of the *Littorio* ⁽⁵⁸⁾. Cavallero responded to Bastico, but indirectly to Rommel, saying openly that the shipping situation remained very difficult. In the last three days, on five ships sent from Italy one era arrived in Benghazi, despite strong escort. So: would have resorted to warships to ensure at least fuel, ammunition and food supplies; Italian and German armored divisions would be left for Tripoli when liable; Air reinforcements were available, but only when the ground equipment were able to accommodate them. A concluding phrase, was heavy like a foot ball: "*you must then respond to the situation with timely available resources in place*" ⁽⁵⁹⁾.

The Cavallero dispatch came to Comando Superiore in the night of the 3rd. Rommel was informed. "*It was characteristic of Rommel-observed von Mellenthin-the reluctance to accept the unfavorable situation beside*" ⁽⁶⁰⁾.

According to the Commander of the *Panzergruppe* the bulk of the New Zealand Division was annihilated and British forces

were divided into two groups: one, of limited extent, in the central area of Gabr Saleh and the other, including bulk of the enemy, between Sidi Azeiz and Bir el-Sheferzen. This vision of the situation-in stark contrast with the Italian viewpoint-he took the German Command deemed superfluous possession of Bir el Gobi. In fact, since that morning⁽⁶¹⁾ the *Panzergruppe* arranged the withdrawal of the garrison. Telephone communication was collected by Gen. Mannerini, who, well aware of the value of the position-ordered the garrison at Bir el Gobi-to set up a stronghold, taking advantage of the arrival of the I *Giovani Fascisti* battalion⁽⁶²⁾, and prescribed the recon grouping to stick only to orders coming from the CAM.

In the afternoon, Gambarà came under the command of *Panzergruppe*, in el-Adem. There were several things I wanted to make it clear in no uncertain terms. Found Gause and had a long talk with him about the situation in General and how to command of Rommel. On the first topic he tried to convince his party that the British mass wasn't at all as they gathered behind the border defenses, but straddling the Trigh el Abd at Gabr Saleh. It was the opportunity that the CAM moving further South, so as to fend off British initiatives against Sidi Rezegh or against el-Adem or against Bir-el Gobi. Also pointed out that the *Ariete* was at the mercy of uncertain supplies that the columns were sent from time to time, as it did not have adequate organic logistic autonomy. The *Trieste* was not to be regarded as a German lightweight Division; but as a simple Infantry Division on normal trucks, at the mercy of any idiot armored cars that would bother you while driving and that, once you come near the place of use, must necessarily descend from the vehicles, unload materials and proceed in combat on foot. "

How, then, to the exercise of command from the Commander in Chief, Gambarà was even more explicit by saying that:

"a) [Rommel] disappeared not give verbal orders now at one time to the next Division without anything to keep the Corp command informed causing this misunderstanding and confusion-confusion of the division commanders-disordered movements corresponding to current situations on a limited area of the battlefield and not to the general situation of the vast Theater of battle.

b) was not acceptable for the Commander in Chief responsible for disappearing for the whole day (not connected with the adventure of 4 days of absence) and that any question that the Corp Commander speaking to Comandante Superiore were to remain unresolved until the return of General Rommel. "

Gause “agreed perfectly on the explanation”, Gambarara reported, and promised that the arrival of Rommel would have made possible a direct conversation.

“Gen. Rommel arrived commanded at 18:00 hours - Gambarara continued to report in his report – I was called by him. Did nothing but repeat the above in writing and what was said out loud to Gause.

I was hoping that the Gen. Gause would be back, but unfortunately I had to see how soon remained silent and impassive to the objections that my saying I was General Rommel.

Anyway, the interview took place with great cordiality, was diametrically opposed effects since Rommel, assuming that the enemy in the South and in the central area of Gabr Saleh had not that scarce and that forces were concentrated in the large area with of Sidi Azeiz-the wire, thought would secure the agreed point in this zone, to punch and push it from North to South-East towards Sceferzen-Magdalene.

To my further, repeated objections to the danger that could come from Bir el Gobi, *if he had not fulfilled his assumption, he replied that he was sure how much asserted-especially as his aircraft had reported having noticed more than 800 vehicles that retreated over the barbed-wire fences, eastward, and that the enemy, according to him, must have been tired and badly reduced.* Urged me to remove the garrison of Bir el Gobi-leave undefended stripping unit and the strongpoints held by GG.FF,

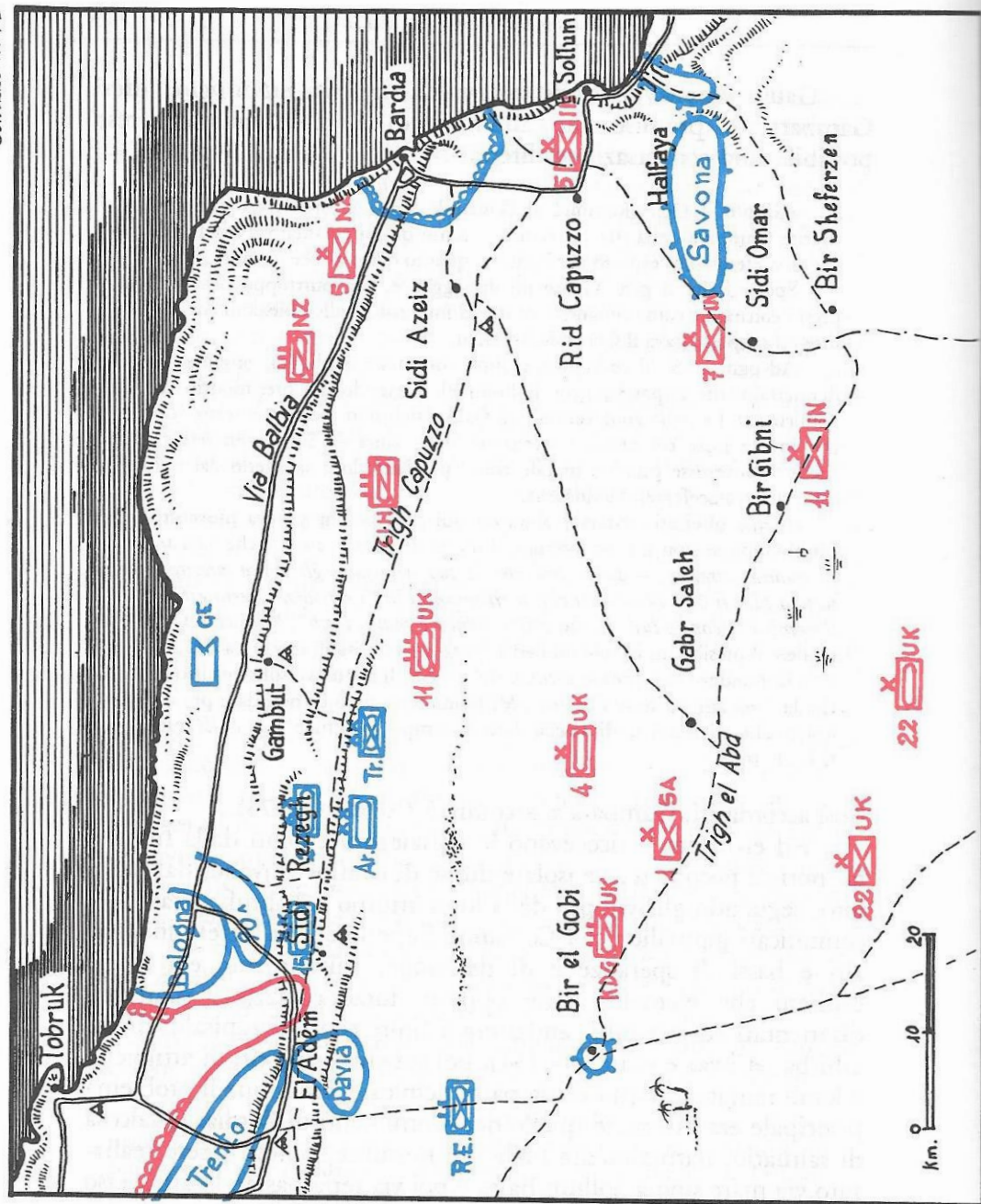
Replied that *"I wasn't convinced"* and he hoped only that *"his vision was the exact"*, but promised Me not to give more orders blocks to divisions and to let their time for supplies (...)" ⁽⁶³⁾,

So we have agreed, Gambarara will leave. (sketch No. 75).

At el-Adem we received news from the frontier, little happy news. The isolated border defenses were, for their part, following developments in fighting around Tobruk through daily releases of the Comando Superiore, which determined the highs and lows of hope and disappointment. Initially it was also happened that elements of opposing forces, armored, disoriented and stragglers fleeing, they went up against the strongholds of Bir Ghirba, "Cova" and "Cirener" ⁽⁶⁴⁾, then replaced the artillery shelling and attacks by the enemy. However, the main problem was that of supplies of Bardia. Something only occasionally at night, of course, could be accomplished by sea up to Low Sollum and then overland through the Halfaya and overcoming the desert to Bir Ghirba, but obviously not enough. On November 30 had been overwhelmed the small Italian-German garrison still resisted in Sidi Omar and now it seemed that an entire Brigade was collected West of Bardia (it was the fifth New Zealander, replaced at High Sollum by the 7th

LA SITUAZIONE IN MARMARICA LA SERA DEL 2 DICEMBRE

Schizzo n. 75



Indian Brigade). Although on December 3 had already given directives, Rommel was not quiet. At 13:00 of the 2nd returned from Crüwell and told him that Bardia and Eastern defences could not hold for long, so just thought of making a large mop-up operation to restore the situation at the border.

It seems that offhand Crüwell has not objected, but when he saw the complete lines from the plane showed clearly its disagreement. With regard to maneuver, in his view, there were two alternatives: eliminate the salient of ed-Duda or rid the face of Sollum. While realizing the precariousness of the situation at the border, its preferences, in terms of urgency, went to the first solution:

"We must not repeat the mistake-he wrote that same afternoon to *Panzergruppe* -to abandon to the enemy on the battlefield on which the *AfrikaKorps* earned a victory and take another operation in a distant field rather than completely destroy the opponent" ⁽⁶⁵⁾.

But there was another reason for dissent: the forces to be used. Crüwell believed essential to withdraw from the fight the two *PanzerRegiment* and concentrating them North of Gambut and postponed for the necessary repairs. The rest of the *AfrikaKorps* was available and could be fully employed. If it were truly imperious run to appeared Sollum, this had to be accomplished with the bulk of German forces and the Corps of Maneuver. Rommel still reflects his assessment of enemy forces carried out by the *Panzergruppe* information service: in Marmarica the remnants of the 7th Armored Division (more or less equivalent to an armored Regiment.) and infantry forces of the entity of a motorized Division; at Tobruk, the equivalent of one-and-a-half Division reinforced by an armored group; in the Western desert two to three partially motorized divisions with a couple of armored groups; in Egypt two infantry divisions. Then, late in the evening, confirmed in substance the previous address. Without prejudice to the two *Battlegroups* to start one on Balbia and the other on Trigh Capuzzo, Neumann-Silkow, which was entrusted with the responsibility for the operation, would lead the stake with a pool at your fingertips.

At 23:00 arrived at the Corps of Maneuver the order from *Panzergruppe*: the *Ariete* had to reach the area by Gasr el Arid and *Trieste*-stay where she was, lying along the cordon to the west

of the first. Both individually and collectively, should oppose a barrier against pressures from the South. At 23:30 Gambara issued Executive provisions and sent immediately after their completion, the order that the next day, at dawn, recon grouping brought to Bir el Gobi.

The XXI Corps, with which was the 90th Light – would continue the blockade of Tobruk, trying to eliminate the salient of ed-Duda and exploring elements pushing southwards.

In British field there was only confusion. In the afternoon of 1 December Ritchie had wanted to go personally to Norrie and to Gott. Had not found, however, remaining a little in command of 7th armored Division, had hinted at head office operations that matured within itself. Considered it of utmost importance to attract in the desert the *Panzer*, causing them to leave the area of Sidi Rezegh, where they were safe, surrounded by anti-tank pieces. To achieve this aim was directed to attack el-Adem, who represented “*the key point in the battle of Tobruk*”, with 30 Corp. For his part, Norrie had decided the reordering of all units at the Trigh el Abd, but on the evening of Dec. 1, when he returned to his Command and had the thought of immediately to advised Ritchie, accordingly. On 2 December the British situation was as follows: the 4th armored brigade was around Bir Berraneb to take care of the maintenance of tanks; the 22nd armored brigade, stationed at more than thirty kilometers south of Trigh el Abd, near the 62nd F.M.C., continued reform with new tanks and crews; the 1st South African Brigade was stopping at Taieb el-Examp; the 2nd South African Division was moving to the frontier to make available the 4th Indian Division. To protect this reordering activity was a semicircular front, Northwest face, with the 1st *King's Dragoon Guards*, the 11th Hussars and Cavalry Regiment from New Zealand.

The day after Ritchie flew at Tobuk to realize the local situation, but mostly agree with Godwin-Austen a sortie from the fort on the night on 5 December and facilitate the threat against el-Adem. Meanwhile, the evening of 1 December, Auchinleck was at fort Maddalena, in command of the 8th Army. There was ten days ago. “*He took personally the-observed Churchill – but strictly watch the work of his subordinate. It seemed to me the best solution for neither*”⁽⁶⁶⁾.

Auchinleck was optimistic. Agreed with Ritchie's opinion, that the outcome of the battle was still in the balance and that a constant pressure on the enemy, now worn out, would lead to victory. He said well Bastico: the battle is taking on the characteristics of wear and the axis was at the low point dead. Did not receive anything while the enemy is growing stronger. Before leaving Cairo, Auchinleck had placed sending to the western desert the 150th infantry brigade from Cyprus and an armored car regiment from Syria, as well as the establishment of the 38th Indian Brigade to watch the army's rear. The convoy carrying the 1st Armored Division from the United Kingdom had already arrived and the large unit was to be launched at the 8th Army for an intensive training program to be carried out immediately east of the border, within easy reach of the battlefield.

At first light on 3 December Neumann-Silkow called the «avant-garde». The Knabe Group (21st *Panzerdivision*) penetrated through the deployment of the 11th Hussars without difficulty ⁽⁶⁷⁾ and arrived at Sidi Azeiz, where it was arrested by a mixed formation called *Goldforce* (a squadron of the *Central India Horse*, an anti-tank battery and 31st campaign artillery). The Geissler Group (15th *Panzerdivision*), approximately 17 kilometers from Bardia on the via Balbia, fell into a deadly ambush by another enemy formation (a squadron of the *Central India Horse* and the New 28th Zealand battalion) and almost completely lost the 15th machine-gun battalion. At this point, Neumann-Silkow had enough and ordered to disengage and retreat until Gasr Gambut and el-Arid. In the latter location had deployed the *Ariete* with 92 M 13 tanks, of which only 50 efficient; 50 light tanks, of which just one third efficient; 26 artillery pieces and 36 47/32 guns.

On balance; the day was translated into a sterile attrition, compounded by the *Desert Air Force* on various units, including the German 3rd Recon Bn., and on the same command of *Panzergruppe*, in order to induce him to move Bir Batruna. The active counted only one action in the late afternoon brought the right of the *Trento* to Bir Bu Asatein, Bir el-Garsa and Bir Salem and allowed the reoccupation of some positions previously lost.

At 20:00 gathered Gause and Bayerlein, the two heads of the German general staff. The program for the next day was arranged by accepting, but partly, the insistence of Crüwell. Against Bardia

would go the whole 15th Panzer; an a part of the 21st, however, along with the Mickl Group, would be over ed -Duda. Eliminating this salient would strike the reduced garrison of Tobruk by the initial perimeter, saw the recent success of the Lombardi grouping operation of the *Trento*, so everything was carefully arranged. Overnight on 4 were reached the basis of departure: Mickl's 155th infantry to the South-East, the 200th engineering battalion West of the marabuto of Sidi Rezegh, a detachment of the 21st Panzer at Belhamed. The garrison of ed-Duda was consistent ⁽⁶⁸⁾ and its northeastern flank was watched from the 4th Border and 18th New Zealand battalion.

4 DECEMBER.

The Mickl Group left the base of departure at 07:30, after about three quarters of an hour of preparation, supported by a strong alignment of artillery. He was arrested by the violent reaction of fire and by a counterattack, but at 09:30 the III/104th riflemen penetrated beyond the axis Road, between the *Essex* and the 18th New Zealand. Things were thus well aware that at 10:00 the German side thought of the imminent conclusion. Also the 90th Light had moved to facilitate the success of the plan with a small concurrent action. Instead the resistance continued and received unexpected help soon, albeit indirect, from a *Jock Column* that appeared shortly after midday Southeast of the Bir Bu Creimisa escarpment, by pressing on the side of *Pavia* and occupying the eastern end of the escarpment. Even worse: from Bir el Gobi Ritchie received unequivocal news about sightings.

Norrie had decided to wait for the full availability of the 4th Indian Division before pining against el-Adem. Since this was not expected to be possible until 6 December, decided to make a preliminary move: take over Bir el Gobi. Was unaware of the extent of its garrison, but I thought it was terrible. However did not intend to take any chances. On the morning of the 3rd had taken report, entrusting to the 11th Indian Brigade (Gen. Anderson) with a squadron of the 8th *Royal Tanks*, a battery of campaign and the 7th field heavy artillery, to go with a night march to the southwest of Bir el Gobi and invest in front reversed the positions of hill 176 and 182 hill to

Northwest of the village. Was the pattern followed by the Gen. O'Connor in operation Compass. The 4th armored brigade, on the other hand, would be stationed in Hagfet el-Gueitinat to provide a wing support to the 11th Indian and a support to the squadrons of 1st King's Dragoon Guards and the *Jock Columns*. The 1st South African Brigade, by Taieb el-Esem, would have sent small moving parts in the area Acroma -el Adem. This pian, whose signs have already been transposed by Italian side. In fact, the previous afternoon the Col. De Meo had reported battles against mechanized patrols and artillery and Gambarà had communicated to *Panzergruppe* that in his view it was an "anticipated" on the next day's program.

At the 4 December 03:50 the head of 11th Indian Brigade reached the collection area at 5-7 km, from Bir el Gobi and 7 British batteries opened fire. The Italian readiness had turned out growing rapidly over the past two days. We know that at the junction of Bir el Gobi had remained a small recon grouping garrison, but at night on 2nd was the II *Giovani Fascisti* Battalion surrounded, ramping up to defend on hill 184 and hill 188 (British literature include altogether as hill 182) southeast of Misefa Azuel and West of the runway for el-Adem. In the course of the day of the 2nd came also the battalion command and the I Battalion, which went to hill 176 (British documents as indicated in hill 174), two kilometers northwest of Bir el Gobi, for el-Adem. Between hill 188 and hill close 176 about nine kilometers.

The Group of battalions (Lt. Col. Fernando Tanucci Nannini) was centered in the recon grouping but, both for newly arriving in the area, both for less mobility, its initial tactical use was split from that of the rest of the group. The consistency of the two facilities amounted to 660 men for 188-184 (the II battalion) and a thousand for hill 176, where the I Battalion had joined the small existing garrison (a company light tanks, a machine-gun platoon, a platoon from 32/47, a section from 20, the remains of a battery of Milmart). Altogether, then, it was about 1,700 men with 1 medium tank and 12 light tanks efficient, 16 47/32 pieces, 30 anti-tank rifles, 4 20mm gun and two pieces of 102. Not much either as staff or as armament. But enough to induce Auchinleck to comment: *"the defense of Bir el Gobi proved surprisingly stubborn. The enemy was well entrenched, heavily*

supported by tank and anti-tank pieces and some tanks and the garrison was full of determination “⁽⁶⁹⁾. These two battalions were enough to write to Bayerlein: “*Northeast of Gobi [the DAK] joined with the Division [sic] of Giovani Fascisti, which already for a long time had fought with great value in that area*” ⁽⁷⁰⁾.

After half an hour of preparation, under a light rain, the 11th Indian Brigade went to the attack. Against the strongpoint of the battalion (Maj. Gens. Carlo De Benedetti) advanced the II/5th *Mahratta* with thirteen *Valentine*. A thousand yards put foot ashore *Mahratta* then continued and the beginning was promising, they broke on the *obstacle* that the *Giovani Fascisti* had brought out from strongholds and placed at a certain distance, in the desert. But things changed abruptly when the assailant turned against hill 184 and 188: a deadly, point-blank fire, welcomed them so that after a brief and dramatic uncertainty, at 10:00, the Indians had to desist from trying to leave and artillery to soften the goal. Further South, the II *Cameron*s battalion with three-*Valentine* had turned against hill 176, thinking it might have been abandoned. A little more than a thousand meters the infantry descended from the vehicles and he preceded by tanks and *Bren carriers*. At 400 meters *Giovani Fascisti* opened fire and British formation, firm until then opened out then after a convulsive and tenacious struggle, had to leave the hold and turn northeast of the position.

More or less at the time the recon grouping -whose strength consisted of 5 armored cars, 4 medium tanks and one light, and 9pieces 65/17-clashed with units of the 4th armored brigade and lost some means, while a squadron of *King's Dragoon Guards* arrived at Bir Beiud (a dozen kilometers northwest of Bir el-Gobi) and ignite the large depot of the Corps of Maneuver existing therein: 1300 drums of gasoline and diesel, 800 five days of food supplies and about two *unfoc*.

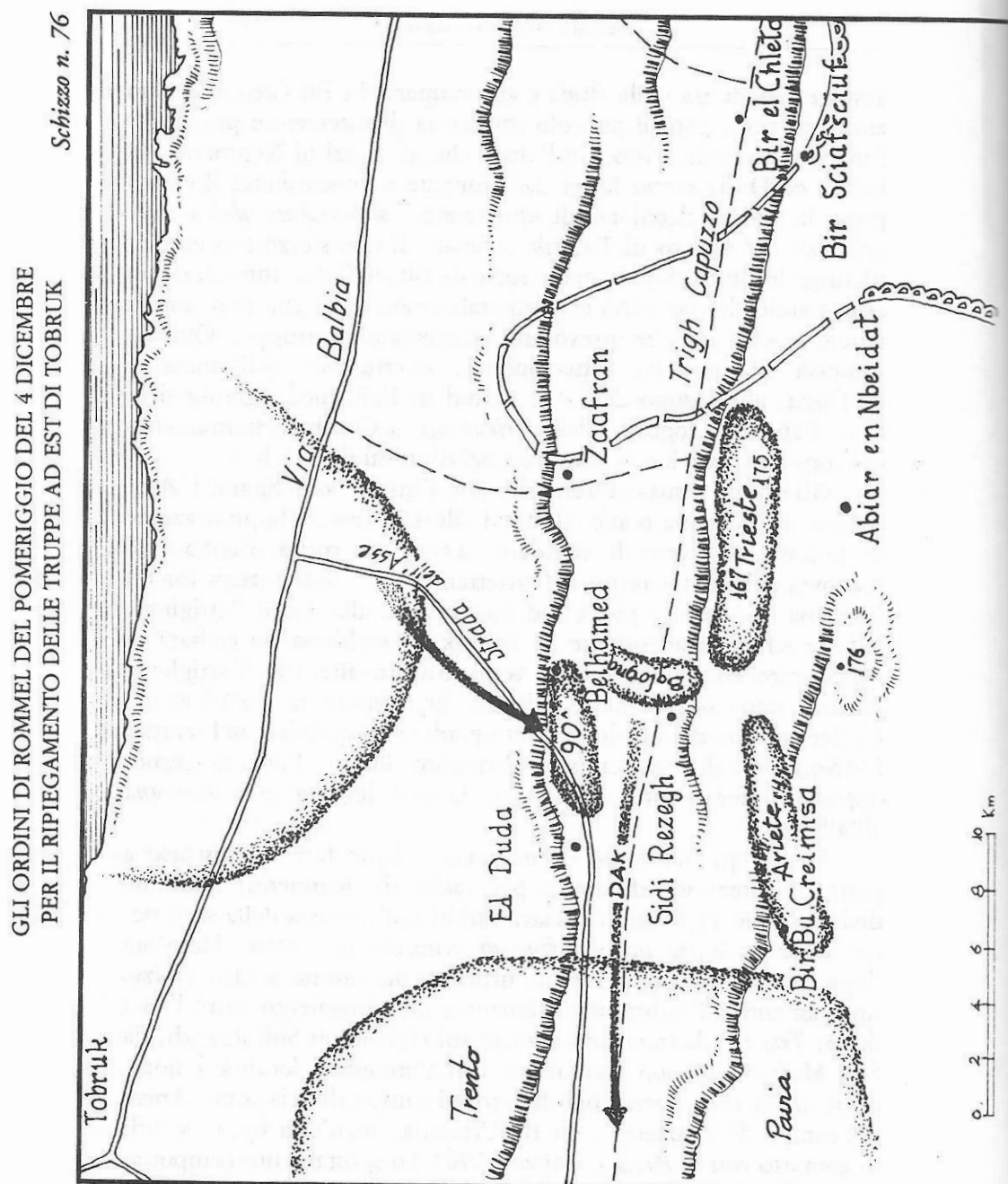
It was around noon that Rommel's attention shifted to the South. The news coming, interception and aerial reconnaissance were composing a threatening picture. It seemed, a part of the 7th armored Division and the 22nd guards Brigade were heading to Bir el Gobi and at the same time other mechanized units were intending to

turn the right side of *Pavia* and to occupy Bir Bu Creimisa. It was not quite true, though the danger imposed to intervene before it was too late. Having regard, what's more, that efforts of Neumann-Silkow at ed-Duda were far from reaching a conclusion, Rommel took the abrupt decision to "*prepare the abandonment of the eastern sector of the Tobruk blockade*", for a focused effort by all mobile units in the area of Bir el Gobi. Intended, in other words, temporarily forget what could not hold and that would have resulted in dispersion of troops. Then: abandoned the attack toward Sollum, stopping the attack on ed Duda, abandonment of the area north of Belhamed, eviction of all the logistical apparatus of the *Afrikakorps* at Gambut, the reposition of the Corps of Crüwell and Gambara moved around el-Adem.

The orders followed during the entire afternoon. The *Afrikakorps* was recalled at 12:50 and 15:00 received the clarification to the West of el-Adem; at 15:00 the Corps of Maneuve took notice of Sidi Rezegh on retreat-Bir Bu Creimisa (*Ariete*) and South (*Trieste*); at 15:10 the German artillery deployed east of Tobruk was also not arriving to clear and equal order was addressed at 18:00 by the Italian and non-divisional artillery; at 22:00 he was advised the 90th light. Performing retrograde movements was staggered over time. The *Afrikakorps* had to travel during the night, after the withdraw of the services; the 90th Light and *Bologna* at dawn.

The timing of the maneuver is good to make a speech in hand. The notice issued by radio from Mannerini to the two divisions, at 15:30, left no doubt as to the urgency of the situation: "*soon you will receive the order to move in the evening.*" Half an hour after it was posted by an official written order: start packing at dusk; exercise before the dawn of the 5th; the *Trieste* deployed facing South on Sidi Rezegh Ridge, from Sidi Muftah (not to be confused with the town Northwest of Bir er-Reghem, in the desert) to the airfield; *Ariete* from airfield to Bir Bu Creimisa, also facing South into contact with *Pavia* (sketch No. 76). The move meant a 30-35 kilometers to the *Trieste* and fifty for the *Ariete*. The order continued meaning: "*the Ariete must be ready for act on the right flank of the enemy which attacks the Pavia; the Trieste to tighten more to the right (Sidi Rezegh)*". In essence: defensive, collected between Bir Bu

The orders of Rommel in the afternoon of 4 December for withdrawal of troops to the East of Tobruk



Creimisa and Sidi Rezegh, as offenses from the South and East. No orientation for Bir el Gobi, where the *Govani Fascisti* battled bravely. At 14:00 was another vehement attack of 11th Indian Brigade. It lasted two hours, then ran out with heavy casualties, especially among the officers of the *Cameron*s. A raid of axis aircraft at low altitude concluded the day.

5 DECEMBER.

At least judging from the reports sent by the 7th Armored Division under the command of the army, in the British camp was not yet clear what was happening in the area of Bir el Gobi, however there were no doubts about the need to eliminate as soon as possible the "bags" identified. Prior to joining the Guards Brigade, Norrie led Anderson to settle the matter. At dawn on the 5th, the *Cameron*s and company a of the *Mahratta* launched a silent a bayonet assault. The reception of *Govani Fascisti* was such that in a short time the attempt an abortion, although powered by other forces.

While to the South resisted, North was full over the withdrawal. At 02:00 of the night the *Panzergruppe* sent to the 90th Light's the Executive order starting at 07:00 moving southward at ed-Duda for going to side on Belhamed and XXI Corps to transmit to *Bologna* a similar order. The *Bologna* and the 90th Light had long been almost geographically isolated and often even under the appearance of transmissions. German links were and the agreement between the generals Gloria and Sümmermann. On the evening of 4 December, at 22:00, the latter had taken care of the future of the imminent abandonment of positions. Gloria from two days unable to establish radio contact with the Command of XXI Corps and the remnants of his Division were insignificant. The departure of the 90th light would place him in an intolerable situation, so he decided to open a gate that night along the via Balbia-track for Zaafran-Sidi Rezegh Trigh Capuzzo-el-Adem. The few available vehicles were distributed between units and ones inefficient transported in tow ⁽⁷¹⁾. The prisoners taken in tow. Re-established radio contact at around 10:00, following further directives of Rommel, Navarini dispose the *Bologna* ranks

to the right of the 90th Light, straddling the Trigh Capuzzo, more or less to the height of the Sidi Rezegh marabuto. Where, however, the situation had not permitted-and it was what was happening-the two divisions would have continued to fit between the *Trento* and the *Pavia*: the 90th Light on the Street axis, and the *Bologna* to the fence of Trigh. The first one had not exactly news, but the second was coming with only the loss of the prisoners and their escort due to enemy attack.

The retreat of the *Afrikakorps* had not encountered significant problems. Incidentally, although it hadn't even come into conflict with the 5th New Zealand Brigade West of Bardia, even after his departure was able to hold back for half a day the attention of Ritchie. In the early hours of the morning the 8th Army Command had sent a very clear message to Norrie:

“(...) Due to movements of enemy troops towards Bardia, is deemed essential, before addressing the situation of Tobruk, restrict enemy activity in the border area, thus reducing its ability to refuel at Bardia and operate behind us. You get ready to discuss the plan with the incoming Staff today”⁽⁷²⁾.

Norrie was not even "*prepared to discuss*". When the dispatch was deciphered and staff officer arrived, the danger to the border had vanished.

At dawn, the 21st *Panzer* had already come to the West of el-Adem and the 15th was coming on the flow. The latter received 08:35 order placed at Hagfet Sciuaban (14 miles southwest of the junction of el-Adem), setting the conditions to repulsing an attack as to advance towards Bir el Gobi. At about 09:30 a wiretap revealed that the 7th armored Division remained by the time Northwest of Bir el Gobi, thus the *Panzergruppe* deduced that 30 Corps would launch against the *Pavia*, continuing in the direction of ed Duda. Second, the *Afrikakorps* was Crüwell intervene as late as possible in order to take on the side and on the back the enemy engaged with the *Pavia*. Rommel, however, preferred to seek battle. The *Afrikakorps* had to reach just the positions held by the *Giovani Fascisti* and linkup as soon as possible with the Corps of Maneuver. The following day would, both bodies, attacked along the Trigh el Abd sweeping all British depots North and South of the runway, with a large Luftwaffe co-operation. To release the front of Sollum needed a big win. This thought of Rommel to The

But for the Corps of Maneuver the times were "*blown*" and the repercussions of this are heavy psychologically and operationally. The *Panzergruppe* had asked, through Gen. Calvi, and at 09:50 Gambarà did respond that "*Trieste division from 04:30 this morning's reached the zone set. It seems, from the Ariete intercepts partial is moving towards the area established at 15 kilometers from Trieste. It seems, therefore, that the orders have been received from divisions. I'll wait another hour. Then if I get the feeling that the Ariete cannot reach the area assigned by you, will focus the Trieste on the left flank of the Pavia (Bir Bu Creimtsa)*" ⁽⁷³⁾. Rommel expected no further. At 12:30 with a new message he made of the situation and gave the orders. The 7th Armored Division was supposedly around Bir el Gobi. The *Afrikakorps* would depart at 14:00 to deal with it and, on the other hand, "*the CAM must strike to the South at 14:00 from the zone of 57 left 10 split strongly left with 83 left 5 until to 80 left 10*" ⁽⁷⁴⁾, i.e. covering the eastern flank of the *Afrikakorps*. At that time the divisions of the Corps of mManeuver were still motionless, beyond Sidi Rezegh! And the thing was known, so much so that the war diary of the *Afrikakorps*, after the order of *Panzergruppe* and added "*In relation to these provisions the motorized Corps move simultaneously towards el-Gobi*", had been noted in the margin: "*We hope!*" ⁽⁷⁵⁾.

The misunderstandings and delays are piled up. "*At 14:30- the diary of the Trieste reads -arrives from Corp command orders to break contact with the enemy and start folding into the Btr Bu Creimtsa*". As you can see, the order has nothing to do with the devised withdraw on Sidi Rezegh Escarpment (which does not appear on sketch of the diary of the *Trieste*), but is to be asked in relation to recent decisions by Rommel. Moreover, it is very poorly summarized the message of Gambarà, which goes like this:

"Enemy seems to want to stick astride the Gobi- el Adem track focusing on right of the *Pavia*. German Corp from el-Adem points on Bir el Gobi-acting in the West of the track. *Trieste* division moves immediately making contact with the *Pavia* West of Bir Bu Creimisa and at 14:00 hours of today bear ready to counter-attack in cooperation with German Corp towards direction 6 km North-East of Bir el Gobi-along directing on Creimisa -hill 180 Northwest Dahar hill 185-trigonometric signal 188 -trigonometric signal 183. Strong Point of the *Giovani Fascisti* at el Gobi still resist). ⁽⁷⁶⁾.

However the Division was on the way to the reception of this phonogram. Made him quite quickly thanks to the provision already taken, but it was very late. Meanwhile Gambarà turned to *Ariete*: "*Delay your unexplained movement STOP move quickly and with the highest possible speed on Sidi Rezegh STOP warn just arrived*". At 15:00 the two divisional responded. Balotta said he started the movement. Piazzoni stated that "*there is my route under fire from both sides. Move trying to open the road.* "

At Bir el Gobi- the *Giovani Fascisti* battled bravely to repel another attack. This time Anderson had also used the reserve: the I/6 *Rajputana* Rifles with a second company of *Cameron's* and four *Valentine*. The tanks had entered with impetus the stronghold of the I battalion - the principle objective but, as they were removed by the infantry, under a whirlwind of grenades, had to reverse the march and exit from positions when the *Rajputana* were still at 200 meters. Immediately had triggered the arrest of fire automatic weapons and, after a couple of hours of fierce fighting, Anderson was forced to desist once again. Also because the *Afrikakorps* was coming.

Crüwell had set in motion at 14:30, preceded by 3rd Recon Bn. Was anything but pleased with how you put things. The worry about the delay of the Corps of Maneuver and even more unknown gravitating on real British situation in the South. In other words, fearing to bump suddenly into the 7th Armored Division and knew of the remains had simply *Panzerregiment*. Contrary to his predictions, around 16:00 fell on the 11th Indian Brigade; especially on the II/5th *Mahratta* still around the stronghold of hill 184, where it was concentrated the II battalion of *Giovani Fascisti*. The one, delivered "*at full speed*", shocked the Indians, who found help and refuge in the fall of the evening. Around 18:00 the Germans, were connected with the defenders of hill 184, and shortly afterwards with the Recon Group which had started towards Bir el Gobi on the direct invitation of the *Afrikakorps*. At 19:45 Col. De Meo said the Corps of Maneuvering which would have a dozen from kilometers north-east of Bir el Gobi-waiting for the *Ariete* and added: "*Of Tanucci not know anything, the fuel depot of the Ariete burns (...)*". At that very moment the Leut. Col. Tanucci was seriously injured.

Oddly enough were incorrect the appreciations made by

both sides at the end of the fighting encounter. As far as Anderson had represented that his unit wasn't able to hold long-lost more than a third of the actual-Gott downplayed the incident and said that the Brigade at Norrie was counter attacked by only ten Pzkw, but that it was facing substantial forces. Crüwell, for its part, at 20:40 warned the *Panzergruppe* to be stumbled upon a strong enemy force, comprising units of 7th Armored Division and 4th Indian Division, which didn't look at all willing to withdraw: "*the Afrikakorps was kicked into a hornet's nest today*" wrote on war diary. Therefore preferred to move Northwest and take advantage of the night to stay conveniently. The movements made in complete darkness broken by multi-colored rockets had inevitably confusion in German ranks, but even more so in British ones were just a few hundred meters the thunderous passage of *Panzer* and armored vehicles.

It is easy to imagine the impatience of Gambara to slow rush of its divisions. Knowing that this was attributed to continuous interdiction, throws a few aerial bombardment (also friendly) and especially to the oozing of mechanized group opponents, one must agree that the *Jock Columns* were more than brilliantly their work.

The XXI Corps had reworked its disposition, but a decrease in troops just hired by *Bologna* necessitated some changes. Previous more contacts between Gause and Gambara, around 18:00 were issued new orders. The *Trieste* was to cross the lines of the *Pavia* in Nza el-Gseat (West of Bir Bu Creimisa), moved on the track for Bir el Gobi-and reaches this spot by night ⁽⁷⁷⁾. The *Ariete* had to overcome Sidi Rezegh and move west of Bir Bu Creimisa, to the *Pavia*. 23:00 arrived under the command of the first Corps battalion of *Trieste* and was heading to Bir el Gobi. At 1 am showed up, which he said Piazzoni to splitting conditions Gambara (currently undergoing a Nza el-Gseat): had to march rejecting enemy attacks and making much of walking street; a shortage of supplies ammunition and water; was over two days. In conclusion, he stated that "*the Division is unable to fight and asked to gather in the area immediately to the South-East of el-Adem*" ⁽⁷⁸⁾. The picture represented had to be persuasive, because he joined Gambara already direct units to stop

southward. Then warned the *Panzergruppe* (01:20 hrs). At that time the head of *Ariete* came to Sidi Rezegh (sketch No. 77).

In the afternoon, at 17:00, was presented at the command of the *Panzergruppe*. Leut. Col. of staff Joseph Montezemolo ⁽⁷⁹⁾, posted by Cavallero. Rommel was absent, so the officer conferred with Gause in the presence of Calvi. When Gause learned the little that was departing from Italy ⁽⁸⁰⁾ and that only at the end of December, with the intervention of 2nd *Luftflotte* in Sicily would have changed the situation in the Mediterranean, with positive reflections on the regularity of maritime transport, leaped, "you realize-" a little excitedly exclaimed "-then you have lost the battle, Libya and war?". Montezemolo replied that the tough losses inflicted to the opponent gave him confidence in the remainder of the battle. "Amazing-reported then to Cavallero-you don't know our losses, telling me serious, and affirms that await orders from Rome. I object to that Rome did not order can give until you submit so little news about the real situation. " After a visit to Gambarara, around 20:00 Cavallero's Envoy returned to *Panzergruppe*. Rommel awaited him and entered immediately in topic:

"(...) [Rommel] summarizes how exposed-communicated then Montezemolo — and summarizes by saying that, overall, for battle in progress, will not strengthen (as it is announced in Tripoli cannot be promptly on site).

Exposes then as the enemy, on the other hand, continue to supply their forces: all information is confirmed.

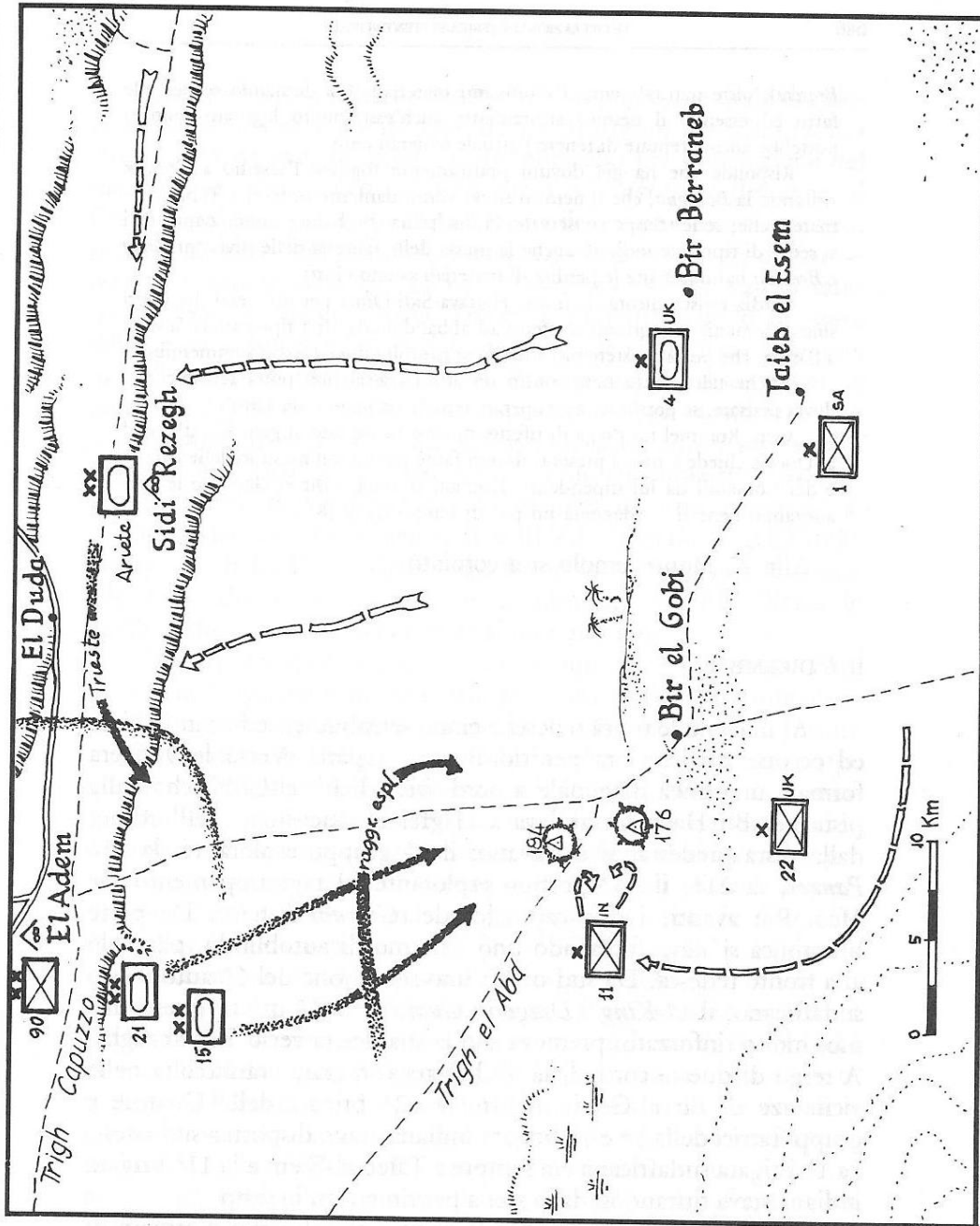
The situation is so serious because our forces have had very substantial losses in men and weapons or the two German armored divisions , who started the battle with over 250 tanks will now have a total of less than 40, others are destroyed. There are many official losses: only two German divisions have fallen 16 commanders of battalion and Regiment; overall have fallen approximately 4,000 German men; Italian losses have not yet been reported, but are evaluated equally by the Gen. Rommel (the *Bologna* lost much; the *Savona* two bns.; the *Ariete* has average losses, the *Trieste* lost about 600 men). The ammunition is scarce, not enough for a battle: now is our greatest concern.

The Gen. Rommel asks sending ammunition to continue the battle with honor and not be forced to capitulate for lack of ammunition. If you cannot press the Cyrenaica, on Gen. Rommel believed best withdraw to Tripolitania rather than getting around and having to capitulate. In this sense the General would take the command of the troops now employs.

Do I observe to Gen. Rommel as a withdrawal of the kind we would lose much of the troops on foot (*Pavia* divisions and

LA SITUAZIONE A SUD DI TOBRUK LA SERA DEL 5 DICEMBRE

Schizzo n. 77



Brescia), in addition to many materials. The question whether that is fact and being the enemy certainly much too worn, you might still try to keep the current deployment.

Replies that he has already had to virtually raise the siege at Tobruk by withdrawing the *Bologna*, which continuously receives enemy reinforcements to Tobruk by sea and that if the troops remain discipline that have so far got, he feels to bring back even the mass of Infantry Divisions *Pavia* and *Brescia*: of course material losses will be big.

Bardia survives; the front of Halfaya-Sidi Omar to two thirds; He lives until tomorrow: will then be forced to abandon it and pullback the *Savona* at Bardia, which can endure longer if resupplied with food by submarines.

Even this however fort against a serious attack cannot resist and you will have to think, if possible, recover units by sea and by air.

Gen. Rommel please report because he has exhibited at Gen. Cavallero and the Duce and asks all those present not to fame with none of the troops he commands and employees. Tomorrow we will act at Bir el Gobi: If things go well you will gain some time (...)”⁽⁸¹⁾.

At 22:00 Montezemolo departs.

6 DECEMBER.

In the morning the German units were interspersed with most considerably and it took a few hours to tidy up the units. At 09:00 had formed a diagonal line Northwest of Bir el Gobi, which track to Bir Hakeim went to Hagfet el-Gueitinat. In order, from the track predicted, were: the 3rd Recon Bn, the 15th *Panzer*, the 21st, the 33rd Recon Bn, De Meo Group arrived at, the two strong points of the *Giovani Fascisti*. The British side was forming a screen of armored cars, parallel to the German front. From the Southwest: a squadron of 6th South African armored car, the 1st *King's Dragoon Guards* and the 11th Hussars (the latter, much strengthened, argued with his right towards Sidi Rezegh). On the rear of this, screen the 4th armored brigade was collected near Bir-el Gobi, while the 22nd Guards Brigade and the battle groups of the 5th and 7th Indian Brigade were stationed in the Southwest. The 1st South African Brigade was always to Taieb el-Esem and the 11th Indian Brigade was retreating from the scene for getting into back into shape.

At 8.30 Crüwell received news that the Corps of Maneuvering was still far away and thus boost the offensive could not be continued. Therefore remained on the defensive; However, in any event, he set the intervention of *Stuka* for future action.

Gambara had informed *Panzergruppe* immediately of the decision to allow the *Trieste* a few hours of rest; throughout the replica at 03:00 had been transmitted the understandings for the operation in the morning: an attack towards the Southeast with the *Afrikakorps* right and CAM to the left; the two Italian divisions had to be in place, ready at dawn. “*Performed the movements-said the orders – will be listed and now targets of attack.*” He was immediately referred to the conditions of *Trieste* and in particular of the *Ariete* stopped at Sidi Rezegh ⁽⁸²⁾ and when, at 06:00, the General staff said that the *Panzergruppe* liaison insisted on the departure of the *Trieste*, Gambara replied that “*it will be sent as soon as possible after cleared up, but it is useless to send orders that cannot be run*” ⁽⁸³⁾. Though warned immediately Piazzoni. As a first measure was organized a column, under the command of Gen. Azzi, with the II and III/66th infantry, XXXII/9th bersaglieri, the I/21st artillery, which left the area of el-Nza Gseat at 08:30, after completing the supply ⁽⁸⁴⁾. At about 11:45 even the remainder set in motion.

At the end of the day the *Ariete* had taken the journey. Didn't know the withdrawal of troops to the East of Tobruk and, above all, that the opponent held firmly ed-Duda, measure to the fire, had lined the Sidi Rezegh escarpment and then forced with the vanguard the Belhamed and even the eastern section of the escarpment to Bir Bu Creimisa. Knew when, at 07:30, arrived at Belhamed. While the Division proceeded slowly facing the opponent, Gambara sent fire an urgent message: “*Depart immediately to place your first fight [= Bir el Gobi] parading in front of Fernandes. Urgent East movement. You will find in the place De Meo, Sandro [Piazzoni] & friends [= Afrikakorps]*” ⁽⁸⁵⁾. Evidently Gambara meant that the *Ariete* were for the shortest route, focusing namely on Bir Bu Creimisa and heading in a straight line to the South (from Bir Bu Creimisa Escarpment at the junction of Bir el Gobi-32 km run). You ignore when the message is received at Balotta. Probably too late to change the decisions already taken. The column was advancing under the offenses from Belhamed and ed Duda. To escape in any passage of ed-Duda to score the lines of *Pavia*. The rearguard, formed by the V/8th bersaglieri, with retrograde movement to protect the swings. In the early afternoon the Division gathered at el-Adem.

At 12:40 Crüwell was informed by the *Panzergruppe*

Trieste was coming and decided to begin the attack without waiting or hitherto there had been much circumspection between him and Norrie: several probing actions, any attempt at local wrapping, artillery duels. While completed preparations, Rommel, who fell immediately approved the idea of advance. At about 15:00 the *Afrikakorps* left positions. Its progression, although carried out on wide forehead, was immediately submitted to the accurate fire of the pieces by 25 pounds or the intervention of a formation of *Stuka*, shortly before 17:00, allowed a short break; but after a very serious loss added to those, already numerous, reported by the Germans: Neumann-Silkow was mortally wounded at six kilometers from Bir el-Gobio

The Azzi column was still far away. Soon fall also under the British batteries firing, the troops were forced to descend from the vehicles and to make about ten kilometers away. Then, exhaustion of men, Azzi had made the decision to stop a dozen miles north of Bir el Gobi and settle in defense for the night.

So the *Afrikakorps* continued alone the fight or reached the junction of Bir el Gobi, but does not beat the big enemy, which seems not to be entered even tactical contact. At 21:15 Crüwell signaled Rommel to face superior forces too, such that it would not be able to confront them even with the help of the Corps of Maneuver. Advance seemed dangerous, because it entailed the risk of being exceeded on one side; better to withdraw in good order. Rommel not break up. Had passed from Gambara and had told him of strong enemy crowding in Bir el Gobi area and of his intention to attack, whether in favorable conditions, the following morning with the *Afrikakorps* and the *Ariete*. Pointing out Gambara totally agreed, he replied that "*this line must be kept*" and that action had to be resumed the following day at 09:00 with the Luftwaffe and Italian co-operation (23:40 hours).

Even Ritchie, however, was confident. At 23:30 exhibited Norrie in his thoughts: expect a night of *Panzer* withdraw, therefore wanted the operation against el-Adem was started as soon as possible and, likewise, a strong *Jock Column* was soon sent to Gazala.

In the morning, at 09:00, Montezemolo had presented to Bastico. Had seen him on arrival and now wanted up on the interview with the *Panzergruppe* Commander. Bastico to be appalled. From what the

was gradually communicated by Rommel had not had the opportunity to obtain perspectives so alarming. Obviously was aware of the difficulties of supplies, and had asked him to appear in person to Rome to discuss ⁽⁸⁶⁾. And now, equally naturally, although moreover Cavallero, did not believe it was more appropriate to move.

“The Gen. Bastico-reported Montezemolo-shows very impressed for the severity of losses and difficulties represented by Gen. Rommel, still unknown to him. Concludes saying that he agreed with Gen Rommel in judging need the withdraw; You'll see, as will the enemy, where you can stop: however it is necessary to ensure as soon as possible the balance of Ajdabiya plate and possibly resume Gialo (...).

Adds to represent on his behalf-to Etc. Cavallero absolutely necessary that Gen. Gambara returns to his functions as chief of the G.S. (...). ⁽⁸⁷⁾.

Before dismissing Montezemolo, Bastico handed him the main data on the situation in Libya on 5 December, to illustrate to the Comando Supremo. In essence, the overall availability in Libya were the following: food sufficient on average up to 20-25 December; 14,500 tons. gasoline and diesel 1,100; 5 *unfoc* for automatic weapons, 4 units *unfoc* for anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons, from 2 *unfoc* for (to 105 pieces/28) to 10 *unfoc* (for 149/12 pieces) for the artillery. In the air, the picture presented by Gen. Marchesi was summarised as follows:

Aircraft	Cyrenaica		Tripolitania	
	available	efficient	available	efficient
Bombers	86	42	9	2
Torp. Bombers	11	6	17	14
Fighter	212	108	77	54
Recon & Observation	37	17	26	19
Total	346	173	129	89

The issue of fuel for the fifth Air Fleet was dramatic. Deducted the amounts distributed to sub-Saharan Africa located in desert locations and full of equipment, remaining 462 tons. wartime activity (average daily consumption equal to one hundred tons), the quarterfinals would be

ceased operating, every possibility as efficient planes would only fuel on board to reach goals within the limits of their autonomy.

7 DECEMBER.

" *December 7 (...) -has been observed-was not marked by events of great importance, but, oddly enough, the thing was just what the decisive day of operation Crusader*".⁽⁸⁸⁾ the day began with the usual artillery fire and with references to maneuvering on the part of the tank. Rommel had put around very soon. At 06:00 he appeared at the command of CAM and talked with Gambara. In essence,

"the gravity of the situation-he told the same Gambara later-it is advisable to consider the possibility of a withdrawal or keep repeating, however, that it is only "to do local mind upon a possibility" that he hopes never to happen. I talk then of a small adjustment in front to be performed with the left wing's retraction of *Pavia* upon losing ed Duda and Belhamed and mentions the line at Ain el-Gazala, that should decide the folding on this position I would order with transmission of a simple issue: "333".

However, to resolve still hopes all doing attack the enemy from his two armored divisions from South to North-East and East of *Ariete* (...)"⁽⁸⁹⁾.

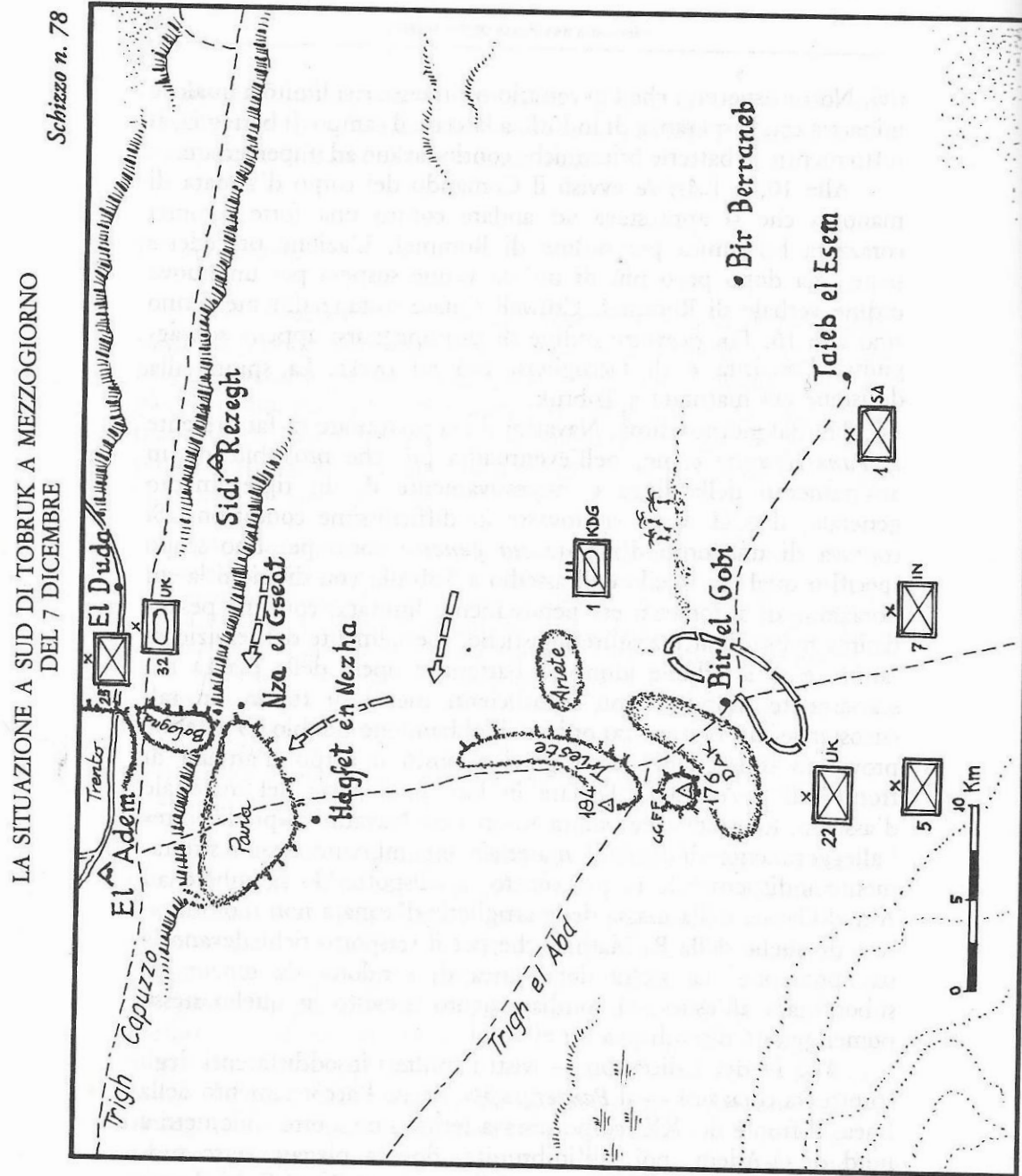
Then Rommel sailed in command of the *Afrikakorps*. We arrived at 09:30 and had an interview with Crüwell. If the opponent had not been beaten that day-he said, according to reports from the war diary of the *Afrikakorps*-was clearly the front of Tobruk and fold on the positions of Gazala. "*Heavy artillery-specify-withdrew from the front of Tobruk and the 90th Light and the Italian formations [?] are they going to retreat*". Even the front of Sollum was to be abandoned. As a result, Crüwell was "*tasked to contain and repel the enemy and counteract it where its pressure became too strong*"⁽⁹⁰⁾, the latter concept, which does not seem very sympathetic to the idea of taking advantage of a good opportunity. In fact, the Italian-German deployment had taken a more cautious wait that's concentrating for a dynamic maneuver (sketch No. 78). Crüwell had no desire to stick to the familiar

reasons, Norrie was the opponent portrayed and just some threat hoping to induce him to leave the battlefield. All while the British batteries continued to rage.

At 10:45 *Ariete* warned the leadership of the Corps of Maneuvering which was preparing to go against a strong British armored column to order by Rommel. The action proceeded well, but after little more than an hour was suspended for a verbal order by Rommel. Crüwell remained essentially stationary up to 16:00. Then received orders to withdraw just come into the darkness and gather further West. The thrust of the decision was made to Tobruk.

Since the day before, he had made sure Navarini to attend *Panzergruppe* as, in the event more than likely a line and then retreat to a general withdrawal, the XXI Corps was in very difficult conditions. It was a *sui generis* Corps: built for a specific purpose which was the siege of Tobruk; with the divisions supplied of vehicles was painfully limited; with a very heavy mass of logistical equipment, especially health care service, and artillery to beat the works of the fort but poorly mobile and with insufficient means of towing. In such circumstances, a sudden abandonment of the blockade order would caused very serious consequences and placed the Corps faced with the need to leave on site much of the siege equipment. Rommel was authorized to Navarini “to prepare” lightening around the bulky material and not strictly necessary and, on the other hand, to “have” the evacuation at Gazala in the mass of non-motorized Corps artillery and those of the R. Marina, which required the breakdown for transportation. Choosing a course of action to take was subject to the outcome of the fight expected on that same afternoon (December 6) at Bir el Gobi.

At 11:0 of December 7-given the unsatisfactory results of the battles between the *Panzergruppe* armor decided the shortening of the line. The front of the XXI Corps was detained up to eight kilometers north of el-Adem, then, at dusk, he had to bend to the South, keeping more or less to the height of the track to Bir el Gobi, along which was deployed the *Trieste*. The 90th Light was already at Gazala, astride of the via Balbia, where the same tactical *Panzergruppe* Command was transferring. At 12:30 Rommel returned to command of the Corps of Maneuver.



"I am informed-reported Gambara-on the latest communications received and on the overall situation that does not hesitate to declare good.

He agrees. It seems to me, however, worried; first to my optimism is cleared and I question if Gause had sent any order. I answer no. Would you share to his command, but to my invitation to eat something before getting into movement, accepts willingly.

During the meal we talk about the situation in General, I present, together with the officers of my command, that we should not think of reversals, which not only would have resisted for other attacks, but we definitely had a decisive victory only if we had persevered. He agrees, and returns to his usual optimism and is convinced that the victory can not escape.

Before getting into the car, with General Mannerini, the repeat again «*nothing 333*» and he repeats cheerful: "*gut-mind 333, nein nein*".

Behind his invitation I do follow from Maj. S.M. De Marco of my command, at which they would have been communicated more orders for the next day. This was 13:45 p.m. precise.⁽⁹¹⁾.

Soon after Gambara phoned Gen. Calvi for bringing him abreast of recent conversation and agreements. However at 15:15 Fernandes gave him the news that he had received orders on withdraw his left wing.

"I remain amazed-continued Gambara in his report; I consider it very serious especially related to conversation with Rommel. I say to Gen. Fernandes to suspend any withdrawal, believing him to be a misunderstanding.

I call on the phone the Commander of XXI Corps demanding clarifications. General Navarini, which mean the conversation Rommel and suspension orders from me to the *Pavia*, is surprised that we have not received orders in this regard. Assures me, though, be the only retreat of the left wing of the *Pavia*.

I note however in communicating uncertainty: I repeat to him having to deal with a "error" -and I as higher in rank and as a representative of the top commander, not to make and to make any withdraw order without explicit formal order written by Rommel. To order take full responsibility. The General Ritelefono Calvi; He tells me that anything accurate, who had no explicit orders but we heard an announcement that will soon have to move and that "*a lot of stuff already moves*."

Anyway, explicit orders I confirm to date involved".

While waiting for news, you had the presence of Gambara express their optimism even Bastico: in your opinion, the situation did not present grounds for alarm and was convinced you were to remain on current positions. If it was to take place the withdraw, this had to be ordered in writing from Rommel, who had full responsibility for operations. In any case, should not be

sacrificed mobile troops. For his part, Navarini showed willing to hold in abeyance the question, but a few hours later came the order of *Panzergruppe* for the retreat on Ain el-Gazalada to start the following day. In summary: the *Ariete* had to gather in the area of Hagfet Sciuaban; the *Trieste* to take *Pavia's* place, where it ceded vehicles to recede; the *Pavia* had to first turn on el-Adem (shortening of the XXI Corps) and then continue on Gazala; the *Bologna* follow the *Pavia*; the *Afrikakorps* focus on Trigh el Abd in Hagfet area-Baar. The only *Brescia* and *Trento* divisions would not budge for the entire day of December 8. As a result, Navarini arrangements for uncoupling of *Pavia*, according to the warning already sent, as a premise to the wider retreat ⁽⁹²⁾.

However, as he was about to begin the withdrawal of units of the *Bologna*, at about 22:00 loomed a violent pressure on the left of the Division, at the turn of the Axis Road. It was the *Duhram Light Infantry* who, backed by 4th *Royal Tanks*, trying to hinder the movement, whose warning signs were not obviously escaped to the 8th Army's information service. The attack, repeatedly rejected and renewed, resulted in a particularly serious situation for the *Bologna*, but ultimately was blocked.

As the curtain fell on the last attempt by Rommel to nip the operation *Crusader*. Indeed, the fighting of Bir el Gobi appear an effort not convinced. It is very likely that the same Rommel would result in making a second burst along the Trigh el Abd, for both justified concerns expressed by Crüwell, both for the awareness of the scarcity of residual forces. Rather than looking for the decisive battle which had announced, would be able to take advantage of the smallest failure or failure of Ritchie.

In the German deep and bitter disappointment at the failure of the Army Corps of Maneuver left a mark, and undeniably, from their perspective, they had good reason: the two *Panzerdivisionen* had lavished continuously and admirably and is understandable to explain absence didn't know Italian. However, it is useful to remember that the same Crüwell had to declare themselves unable to deal with your opponent, even with the assistance of *Ariete* (left with a 40 M 13) and *Trieste*. It has already been said-and was recognized retrospectively by Rommel-that the two divisions were not supplied transport, an instrument for war appropriate to such a war and

that was asked more than they were able to give. This place, it seems proper to criticize the command organization, in a general sense, the Corps of Maneuver, especially with regard to the connections, and also the command action of Gambará and his Divisional commanders doesn't seem immune to the pitfalls. As far as historical journals are excessively string and do not delve into moments and episodes, there is the feeling of a sense of initiative and not much energy to it. Two sentences in the order that sent the Gambará at 00:20 of 8 December to the commanders of the two divisions and Recon Group on the first phase of the withdrawal, seem eloquent: "*The commanders are responsible if some units not reach or goes beyond the designated location*" and "*Replace immediately the Commander will not keep connection*"⁽⁹³⁾.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 9.

- (1) The grouping, placed under the command of Gen. Lombardi, Deputy Commander of *Pavia*, consisted of a battalion of the 27th infantry, a group of 100/17, a 75127 battery, a 47/32, one of mortars from 81, 6th group squadrons *Lancieri Aosta*, two companies assault engineers.
- (2) The Boettcher Group, also called *Arko 104*, was initially formed by 155th and 361st infantry (both with two battalions) of *Afrika*, the German 104th artillery and smaller units.
- (3) J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 339.
- (4) M. CARVER, op. cited above, p. 125.
- (5) Historical Diary of XXI Corps. The order is dated 25.11.1941, at 20:30.
- (6) The resistance at Belhamed had not to have been very tenacious, since Westphal, in an interview with Gambara, admitted that units of the German 155th infantry had surrendered without tenacious opposition, losing approximately 650 prisoners.
- (7) The recon grouping was, in those days, from a battalion of P.A.I with armored cars, a Fascist Youth battalion, six tanks, M 13, four light tanks, nine pieces on 65/17 on the war booty trucks and four pieces of 100/17 on trucks. At 06:30 of the 25th was initiated on Bir el Gobi-in defense of that node of slopes, but its use had to be some uncertainty as to 08:30 they had been sent a communication relay that, without prejudice to the tasks, the grouping was employed by use of *Pavia*. After half an hour, countermand: dependence on Maneuvering Corps continued and, about the eventual support the *Ariete* along the Trigh el Abd, subject to specific orders. The group reached Bir el Gobi at 09:00, but throughout the day of the 25th was unable to make contact with the *Ariete*, stopped at Taieb es-Salem to get to grips with the 1st South African Brigade and the 4th armored brigade.
- (8) The historical Journal of the CAM. The perplexing for the apparent lack of coordination. It may be, however, that there have been contacts via brief with the *Panzergruppe*, if only because of the need to recognize friends promptly.
- (9) The historical Diary XXI Corps, f. 496/0 p. date 26.11.1941, 8:25 hours of Gen. Navarini, addressed to Gen. Piazzoni and, for information, to Gen. Gambara.
- (10) Probably as a result of discussion, the project was subsequently amended, efficacy, therefore at 11:30 Piazzoni's the illustrated in writing to the Commander of the 9th bersaglieri so other: on the right the Boettcher and left a column under the command of Gen. Azzi, composed by 9th bersaglieri, II/65th infantry and I/21st artillery.
- (11) The Brigade numbered 37 *Matilda*, 14 *cruisers* and 20 light tanks.
- (12) J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 342.
- (13) M. CARVER, op. cited above, p. 128.
- (14) As we know, Crüwell will respond immediately (15:12 hours) not to expect immediate aid for Boettcher: «maybe tomorrow».
- (15) The relevant amplitude in question is not derived from an English on a front of attack of that size, but by the fact that the fall of a pair of central strongpoints and

the resulting leakage forced the *Bologna* and the *Afnka* to fall back towards the North open stump.

(16) The historical Diary of Corps to maneuver.

(17) W.E. MURPHY, The Relief of Tobruk, reported by M. CARVER, op. cited above, p. 130.

(18) See Rizzo, op. cited, pp. 228-229, and especially ANTONINO TRIZZINO, *Gli amici dei nemici*, Longanesi, Milano, 1959 and *Traditori in divisa*, Bietti, Milan, 1974. The works of this author are individually tendentious.

(19) The historical Diary of 66th, infantry regiment.

(20) The historical Journal *Trieste*, Division f. 4550/0 p. date 27.11.1941.

(21) Ibid, tele 4551/0 p. 27. date 11.1941, 18 hours.

(22) Clearly not considered the 19th New Zealand battalion, which the night was passed to the orders of Willison.

(23) The historical Diary of XXI Corps. To observe, though, that said historical diary is extremely confused about the events of the day 27 at ed-Duda.

(24) The historical Diary of Corps Of Maneuver.

(25) The historical Diary of XXI Corps. Is not the author of the call, if Navarini or his Chief of staff or Chief Operations Official, which took notes of the call itself. In fact, among other things, is on November 29, but in the case of manifest error.

(26) The historical Diary of *Trieste* Division, cited tele 4551/0 p 27. date 11.1941, 18 hours.

(27) According to the historical diary of XXI Corps, the order would be executed but ending with a failure to make inevitable the abandonment of hill 150. The narration misses reflected in reality and clearly resents the arrival of incomplete and distorted news. Incidentally, the next day the same diary will recognize that the rise of I-Duda had been “*abandoned of the venture*”.

(28) The historical diary of the Corps of Maneuver reported: “06:00 Hours. Major Tuzi [connection staff] announced that the operations Bureau Chief of the P.G.A Leut. Col. Weslphal has given orders for the 15th armored to move towards west. Of Gen. Rommel nothing is said”.

(29) The *Ariete* had long without higher commands communications. At noon, when the radio link was revived, he received the first message in the day trip from Gambarà: “Give us news. Where are you? What do you doing?”. Balotta requests supplies and told that he had made contact with the German command. At 15:00 he informed that CTO order by Rommel ... had abandoned the area of Bir Ghirba and heading West.

(30) The day before the Gatehouse had received 36 new tanks.

(31) M. CARVER, op. cited, p. 138. In the evening the Germans intercepted a message Radio posted by the 7th Armored Division to the 8th Army: “*Finished fighting the enemy scattered, destroyed. 28. tanks, others en route to the Northeast. Est. fighting lasted three hours*” (H.O. BEHRENDT, op. cited, p. 140).

- (32) Bayerlein, who accompanied Crüwell, recalled seeing "*Rommel and his Chief of staff. Both were traveling by day, unshaven, having fell from sleep and were completely covered with dust*" (E. ROMMEL, op. cited, p. 88).
- (33) I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 64.
- (34) The *Ariete* had left Bir Ghirba on personal intervention of Crüwell, from which depended upon. This does not mean that the radio ordered Gambarà 8.30 to the Division point "*more to the south of el-Adem*" (historical Diary CAM, tele date 28.11.1941 1593). You ignore the time of arrival of the order, which was dropped.
- (35) The historical Diary of XXI Corps, f. .. 537/0 p. 1. t. date 18.11.1941, 10 hours.
- (36) J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 365.
- (37) E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 86.
- (38) Confirming that the news could be misinterpreted, naturally perfect good faith, you report the situation known to the command of the Corps Of Maneuver in the afternoon:
- 13:35 hours: "*it appears that the 15th Arm. div. Germany has occupied ed Duda and that Ariete is in contact with 15th „*
- 14:10 hours: "*Turns out confirmed that 15th Arm. div. Germany has occupied ed Duda. It also appears that the 21st Arm. Div. German is in the area of Belhamed (...)*";
- 17:45. hours: "*the Pavia div. Command communicated that the battle of ed Duda is very violent (...)*";
- 20:45 hours: "*Ecc. Calvi (G.S.with connection with the Panzergruppe) communicates telephoned the situation.*"
- 15th armored believed to be contacted Zimmermann [sic] (div. Afrika), i.e. close to Bologna;
- 21st armored in the area of Belhamed and is committed to the East from a hundred enemy armored vehicles;
- Becer [sic] group located in BirBu zone Creimisa (hill 172 – hill 175) opposite to the South, where there are about 100 armored vehicles which 20 already out of action,;
- Ariete: not where you are (...)" (from the historical diary Corps of Maneuver).
- (39) J. A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 377.
- (40) years later, Norrie wrote that "the 1st South African Brigade said to radio November 29 that had canceled the Freyberg Bernard moving forward, but this was later denied by the 2nd New Zealand; the fact of be dependent on some misunderstanding and bad radio reception (J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited, p. 382).
- (41) as far as the Trieste was to change dependency, its connection with the *Panzergruppe* was to take place through the XXI Corps.
- (42) J. A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 385.
- (43) Ibid, p. 391.

- (44) at 7:40 the German interception service captured a message of the 7th Armored Division directed to command 8th Army: "*New Zealand Division at the moment small particular [unwilling]*" (H.O. BEHREND, op. cited, p. 145).
- (45) on Gen. Nome commented that: "*the 1st South African Brigade reiterated his attack, but failed to seize hill 175 and most of the day was spent in shelling the enemy, with large ammunition expenditure*" (J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited, p. 411).
- (46) In fact, Godwin-Austen was very unsure whether to continue to hold ed-Duda for the relevant extension of the perimeter that it entailed and the difficulty of defending it. The Commander of the *Essex*, however, unfastened all doubt: the features of ed-Duda were becoming increasingly strong and he believed he could withstand any attack.
- (47) It is recalled that the Trieste, while constituting Reserve Corps, on the *Panzergruppe* arrangement's had to explicitly follow the bureaucratic rigmarole of the command of XXI Corps, rather than the Corps of Maneuver -for any communication service.
- (48) The historical Diary XXI Corps. From the wording of the call seems clear that Gause did not know exactly which task could be given to the Trieste.
- (49) G. Rizzo, op. cited above, p. 233.
- (50) Jan. HOWARD KIPPENBERGER, *Infantry Brigadier*, Oxford University Press, London 1961, p. 103.
- (51) DSCS, tele 30967/Op. date 25.11.1941, at 9.45.
- (52) DSCS, tele 30995/Op. date 27.11.1941, 14.25 hours: "*The Duce noted that later attempt to sortie enemy from Tobruk has thinned aperture against which press British forces from South East. Duce doesn't doubt that you have taken all necessary measures to prevent further enemy advance and return depth. However wants news. Ugo Cavallero*".
- (53) DSCS, tele 30997/Op. date 27.11.1941 8.40 a.m.: "*this command deems that retains possession of Bir el Gobi is of great importance as the principle tactics of battle and should not be abandoned. Wire, which lent you have maintained and if you can promptly reinforce. Ugo Cavallero*".
- (54) DSCS, tele 31014/Op 30.11.1941 date, at 20.30: "The Duce recommends stepping up coastal surveillance to prevent any blocks on the via Balbia might cause panic and create serious fix to traffic».
- (55) DSCS, tele 31032/Op date. 1.12.1941, 23.15 hours.
- (56) DSCS, precisely on 30.11.1941.
- (57) DSCS, von Rintelen memo dated 2.12.1941. The translation of Rommel's assessment is made by the German military attaché's Office.
- (58) DSCS, tele 20245/Op. date 1.12.1941, hours 23.45 Comando Superiore.
- (59) DSCS, tele 31036 /Op. date 2.12.1941, at 19.40.
- (60) F. VON MELLENTHIN, op. cited above, p. 97.

- (61) At 11:30 on Gen. Fernandes warned CAM that by an order received from XXI Corp was being decided by the *Panzergruppe* withdrawal of the garrison of Bir el-Gobi
- (62) The young Fascists were volunteers enlisted in 1940 in the militia. Dissolved after a short existence 22 battalions on originating and 25 contracts the two- three stayed in the spring of 1941 was formed the 301^a CCNN assault Legion. Moreover, not having yet completed military service, the young fascists. were transferred to the Army (received the red and yellow flames and black fez like hat from fatigue), sorted into a group of battalions, two battalions, and then sent to North Africa.
- (63) DSCS, report of Gen. Gambarara events from 28 November to 10 December, dated 12.12.1941, transmitted by the Commander of the Comando Supremo.
- (64) Were captured several prisoners with its means. Among the documents found, stood out. a map containing the details of the Italian-German defensive organization at the border, whole upgraded to 7 November.
- (65) Reported by J.A.I. HAMILTON and L.C.F AGAR TURNER, op. cited, p. 441.
- (66) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited, p. 223.
- (67) In its advanced the Knabe group was able to resolve a situation unfortunate it ended up a part of the 8th bersaglieri. On November 28, when the *Ariete* by Gasr el Arid-had directed towards hill 175 on Sidi Rezegh escarpment, was left in place the XII/8th bersaglieri with the Divisional trucks. Virtually undisturbed for a few days, despite the presence of South Africans at Bir Sciafsciuf and the retreat from New Zealand, on 2 November the battalion received orders to rejoin the Division proceeding westwards along the Trigh Capuzzo. The movement began at 03:00 in the mornings, just when the Knabe group departed in the opposite direction, but almost immediately the column fell into the ambush. Into turmoil a men and was captured, but most escaped pointing directly towards the North. With a large round along the via Balbia, could rejoin the *Ariete*. At this stage, a new clash led to complications and the rearguard, remained docked, barely succeeded to disengage. It was temporarily taken over by *Bologna*.
- (68) Defended the positions of ed-Duda: the 1st Essex battalion, the 2/13th Australian battalion (less one company), part of the 19th New Zealand battalion, a machine gunners company of, the 149th artillery AT, the 4th *Royal Tanks* reinforced by a squadron of the 7th *Royal Tanks*, the 1st horse artillery with a battery of the 104th and one of the 107th.
- (69) C. AUCHINLECK, *Dispatch* cit., p. 342.
- (70) E. ROMMEL, op. cited, p. 91.
- (71) Auchinleck said: "*the Germans aggregates to the Division and Italian officials seized of existing vehicles, leaving most of the troop walk; many of them preferred to surrender*" (cited, p. 342). You cannot contest the claim due to lack of evidence, though, at least as regards automobiles were not abused or bullied. It is useful to clarify that Gen. Gloria was the junction Zaafran for the 01:00 to 06:00 of 5 December to supervise personally the retreat took place as planned. And it is also appropriate to point out that the enemy could hardly get an idea of the poverty of vehicles of the Italian Infantry Division.

- (72) M. CARVER, op. cited above, p. 159.
- (73) The historical Diary of the Corps of Maneuver, f. 1901/op. date 5.2.1941.
- (74) *ibid.*, f.s.n. received at 12.55.
- (75) J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F. TURNER, op. cited above, p. 455.
- (76) The historical Diary of Corps of Maneuver.
- (77) "Quicken, Quicken -so called Piazzoni Gambarà-enters the deployment of *Pavia* in Nza el-Gseat to reach el-Adem-Bir el Gobi et track brought absolutely tonight at el-Gobi, where are the German armored. (The historical Journal Corps of Maneuver, tele 1904 date 5.12.1941).
- (78) the historical Diary of Corps of Maneuver.
- (79) Leut. Col. Giuseppe Cordero Lanza di Montezemolo belong at the Office Comando Supremo Operations and was a different Staff Officer (will be killed by the Germans at the Fosse Ardeatine in 1944), but-personal qualities to part amazes rather than - a mission like that, including even pivot on private talks with Bastico, Rommel, Gambarà and Navarini, has not chosen an exponent of higher level. Montezemolo arrived the evening of the 4th at Cyrene and had just one conversation with Bastico. The next day he went to visit the main commands. 6 December returned to Rome promoted in the late morning.
- (80) For Benghazi were departing a cruiser and two boats with 3,550 tonnes. of food and ammunition, 350 tons. fuel tanks and German artillery and 250 men. For Tripoli: two cruisers and two motor ships with a thousand tons of food and ammunition, a M 13 tank battalion and one of German tanks.
- (81) DSCS, report compiled by Leut. Col. Montezemolo dated 9. 12.1941.
- (82) The only XII/8th bersaglieri had continued with Divisional and regimental services towards el Adem.
- (83) The historical Diary of Corps of Maneuver.
- (84) A witness is regarded with great concern the way in which individuals "feel" the situation. Col. Fabozzi, Commander of the 66th infantry, stated in his report that at dawn on 6 December Gen. Azzi told him personally that day was supposed to be resting for the *Trieste* and that only in the afternoon would have been sent orders for subsequent operations. It should be noted that the 4 Fellows had returned to command of the Corps and had spoken with the head of the G. S. and by telephone with Gambarà.
- (85) The historical Diary of thrCorps of Maneuver, tele 1815/op. date 6. 12.1941, at 10.
- (86) DSCSAS, tele/0 p 20406. date 4.12.1941, 18.50 hours: "*Situation examined alongside general Rommel requires urgent measures necessary to clarify and its to voice. Later at expressed desire General Rommel coming soon permission immediately to the coast*"
- (87) DSCS, cited report. Leut. Col. Montezemolo.

- (88) M. CARVER, op. cited above, p. 163.
- (89) the gist of the conversation was derived from the cited report of Gambarà in date 12.12.1941.
- (90) J.A.L. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 465-466.
- (91) Cited Gambarà report on 12.12.1841.
- (92) Report of the historical diary of CAM: “*21:15 hours, Chief the G.S. of the Pavia Division communicates having order by XXI C.A. making a small reduction of the line that will go where now the command. Asks the approvals Ecc. General Gambarà. The Excellence orders please wait*”! Almost simultaneously (21:30 hours) came to the Corps of Maneuver's an order from the *Panzergruppe* and the thing was resolved automatically.
- 93) The historical Diary of the Corps of Maneuvering, f. ..2000/Op. date 8.12.1941, at 00:20

Tenth chapter THE ABANDONMENT OF CYRENAICA

1. PULL ON THE POSITIONS OF GAZALA (8-17 DECEMBER)

As soon as received the report of Montezemolo, Cavallero prepared guidelines for Bastico. On 7 December approve by Mussolini and showed to von Rintelen. To these he said, among other things: *"we won the battle, but the game is lost because you can't feed the battle itself"* ⁽¹⁾ and expressed its intention to send to Libya "at any cost" an Armored Division (the Littorio, which was already ready) and a motorized. However, it was necessary to resolve the question of Tunisia: *"I say that the only way is that and without that we cannot bring the divisions to Libya and we will be in very difficult conditions"* ⁽²⁾. Von Rintelen thrown off balance, not merely to emphasize the official thinking of the German OKW that leave hope for an improvement of the situation of logistics:

"It won't be that when the predominance of air in the Central Mediterranean will be returned [= reset], you will be able to enter into new negotiations with France regarding the use of the port of Bisena for war supplies.

The inevitable consequence of premature use of the port would be a British intervention with actions against the French in North Africa, without that French forces were available to the defense, and without which the axis had a chance to rescue (...). ⁽³⁾.

Aside from the question Bisena, however not for quick solution, Cavallero had accepted the substance of the opinion Bastico and Rommel agreed: the blockade of Tobruk could not be maintained; It required break contact with the enemy and give full freedom of maneuver to Commander in place. On that basis, had formulated directives:

"1st-conservation of Cyrenaica should be attempted with every effort: it ensures substantial advantage also have landing port Benghazi, which among other things enables our Navy continue maneuver on two - routes Tripoli and Benghazi;

2nd -ready strengthening Ajdabiya with mobile units is indispensable condition because it can be performed with sufficient maneuver safely;

3rd-would be of the greatest importance to achieve sufficient take back Gialo to guarantee against rapid out flanking from the South;

4th-in this situation is more than ever necessary that the maneuver is carried out by a single commander in accordance with a directive of the Comando Superiore, but with full freedom of execution;

5th -General Gambara that clearance to resume his duties as head of the G. S. provided coordination action Large Italian units is ensured;

6th - ,.....,

7th -is made every effort not to leave in the hands of the enemy infantry units and for pushing back the largest possible amount of weapons and materials; It destroyed everything that cannot be delivered (...)”⁽⁴⁾.

Bastico received the dispatch on the afternoon of the 7th and summoned Rommel to report to Umm er -Rzem (head of the tactical command of the Comando Superiore of Derna and Gazala) to communicate "*important decisions of the Comando Supremo*". Rommel replied that he could not leave his command (5 kilometres west of the road house of Gazala) in such a time of crisis and that, unless warned before 09:00, could be for 11:00 aftermath at his command. Bastico *pro bono pacis* allowed to go to the appointment.

“At 11:00 precisely-described the minutes of the meeting-Excellence Bastico came in place of appointment and came down from the car next to the command bus. A German officer who was there immediately warned the arrival of Excellence Bastico. Nobody came out to receive him. After five minutes Ecc. Bastico went by car to wait. Only after another 10 minutes General Rommel, who came up to the car of Ecc. Bastico.

Got on the bus, General Rommel-very excited and in a disorderly fashion and hasty-start talking (...)”.

The protests touched four Rommel's arguments.

First point: “*the German armored group was unable to achieve a breakthrough because it has not been possible to make fights together. So, yesterday I was at Bir el Gobi-only German armored Corps, which, after a long wait, it withdrew. Would have to circumvent the reject from the South, but the absence of C.A. Gambara, who was supposed to arrive from the North; I not allowed.*” The statement is based on a skewed statement of facts: just re-read the sequence of events of 7 December to be convinced. But there and more. Bayerlein later recounted: “*the night of; [not 7] December, Rommel gave the following judgment of the situation attack DAK's did not*

annihilated the enemy at Gobi, primarily because it lacked the Italian motorized Corps cooperation"⁽⁵⁾ and in the afternoon of that day, the Gambara Corp could be at Bir el Gobi-ready to fight is simple nonsense claim the evening bulletin of *Panzergruppe* sounds differently:

“3. The armored group attacked the 5th current in the afternoon event with German Africa Corps from the southwest region of el-Adem to Bir el Gobi and drove the units of the 22nd Guards Brigade and 4th Armored brigade (...).

4. The armored Group intends to attack the 6th current with the German Corp of Africa and with the motorized Corps of Gambara-by approach-the enemy at Bir el Gobi and southwest of this locality with limited objectives (...)"⁽⁶⁾.

How much to the “hyena” complained verbally by Rommel, i.e. December 7, it has been seen that objectively Crüwell had not all twist-at least from his point of view-to ask for earnestly and curtly to the *Panzergruppe*: “*Wo ist Gambara?*” but than he first believed that it could not solve anything, not even with the *Ariete*

Second point (linked to above): “*the Ariete and the Trieste took few casualties so far, but the maneuver are exaggeratedly slow and need days to move*” and what were the reasons and removed a bit of extravagance, the fact was undeniable and

Third point (and main): “*(...) all my orders must be executed; otherwise you run the risk of losing everything. For example, Gambara and Navarini yesterday morning received my formal notice 333, which meant you start withdraw in a certain way (...).The Ecc. Gambara ordered Navarini not to perform the movement, although not by him Navarini*”. Even here there are distortions. Rommel stopped by the command of the CAM from 12:30 to 13:45 of the 7th and knew perfectly well that Gambara, at least up to the time of his departure, had not received anything from *Panzergruppe*. He had orders to 21:30 (as evidenced by the historical diary of CAM) and responsibility of delay could not be imputed to the recipient. However, the interference of Gambara on *Pavia* are real. Having relied on the highest and the role of “*Comandante Superiore* ‘s representative to «order», as it did, Navarini to wait for an order written by Rommel (and it was well-known that these gave verbal orders or made them give Gause), actually was a

free step. The question of the rank is not held, there-as rightly acquired Rommel-dependency ratio, nor had a solid foundation as the Chief of the G.S., because the Comando Supremo had ordered to sever that position from that of Commander of the Army Corps of Maneuver. Is it true that he seems to have an unusual situation – obviously with the consent of Bastico-that, despite the veto of Cavallero, Gambara continued to hold the two positions. It shows the fact that the historical diary of Comando Superiore always carries his signature. And no doubt that Gambara had remained untouched by the order of the Comando Supremo: “[Gambara] *I mentions his disappointment for the cessation of Office of Chief of the G. S.*” reported Montezemolo in his report. And that to intend to certainly resume at the earliest opportunity. In fact, none had been named to replace him, even as “*acting*”.

Fourth point (the most severe): I had also ordered – said Rommel-333 *at conventional signal CAM occupied with the Trieste the front of Pavia, to allow this to disengage, and the Trieste, since they are short distances, was lend his vehicles to Pavia to move it to Gazala. But this order was not carried out.*” Here, intervened after conferring separately with Major De Marco. Stated that the conventional 333 order had not been received by the CAM, that instead the order of *Panzergruppe* had come in the night (21:30 hours) and reported that Gambara had stated that “*If you give to Pavia the vehicles of the Trieste, there is more. Either way will make the movement tomorrow [December 9]*”. However, things were slightly differently and Rommel had valid reasons for being offend: Gambara had simply changed the German plan, i.e. the provisions of *Panzergruppe*. In the report, compiled some day after at the request of Bastico, Gambara explained the reasons for his initiative:

“Overcome every difficulty of time and environment, the orders of the Corps are delivered between 2 a.m. and 02:30 hours of December 8.

At 04:00 the divisions are in motion, but in the certainty that if I complete the order execution date of Rommel (replace the *Pavia* with the *Trieste* advanced positions), the enemy, who had pressed throughout the day over the entire face, we would be surprised in *flagrante delicto* to accomplish a task so delicate in broad daylight, I decide to withdraw the entire *Trieste* zone 10 km. from el-Adem, tighten with *Ariete* in the Sciuaban area, in conjunction with the Germans on the el-Abd and Trigh with the *Pavia*, right through the recon, grouping that positioned between the *Ariete* and *Pavia*.

For this purpose, I have my 2 officers and called for detailed agreements the three heads of the staffs of the *Pavia*, *Ariete*, and *Trieste*.

You get something like this:

-that the *Pavia* will be auto-transported to the backwater scheduled within the period of time established [?];

-that I avoid to *Trieste* the difficult as far as useless maneuver to replace the *Pavia* on the el-Adem positions;

-that I entrust the task to protect the withdrawal of the Division *Pavia* to the *Ariete*, that to be Armored Division can better which unconsciously accumulate charge; -that I avoid the possible inconvenience of a motorized Division left with no transport (*Trieste*) to motorize a dismounted Division (the *Pavia*)”.

Undeniably, regardless of quality or otherwise of personal vision, operational commander of an Army Corps had neither the right nor the power to change the decisions of the Commander of the army, especially in an operation so delicate as a retreat under pressure from the enemy, without apparently not even try to make timely contact with the superior. At 15:30 on 7 December Gambara had known orders of Gause to Navarini; at 21:30 received orders of *Panzergruppe*; before 02:00 of the 8th operated their own. Time for a clarification, therefore, does not seem to be missed. The result was that, after being alerted at 04:45 Navarini indication of the 8th, followed by those at 07:30, an explicit appeal to the *Panzergruppe*.

“(...) In relation to the order for army today (...) I thought that this order cannot be executed because the command of the Corps of maneuver communicated that has no troops at his disposal to replace the *Pavia* between Trigh Capuzzo (inclusive) and Hagfet en-Ndeza, and in any case does not have to provide vehicles to the same Division for movement on Gazala. I would add that by operating Army Corps was ordered to *Pavia* to remain in place. In this position I can not close the loophole that exists between *Trento* and *Pavia*. Please urgent intervention of this Command” ⁽⁷⁾.

Talk to the tactical command of *Panzergruppe*, as you can imagine, had quickly risen in tone, so Rommel went on to lose the stirrups: “*excited, with making imperious and distinctly villainous, shouts that he fought for three weeks to win a battle and who is determined to bring its divisions to Tripoli and then to get intern in Tunisia (the officers were nodding with their heads)*”. Bastico had self-control and common sense to exercise restraint and “*the beckons with the hand to lower the tone of voice,*” bringing back the dialogue to a more calm. Reasons of

opportunities-avoid creating formally a serious accident-induced superior Commander not to send an official report of the interview to Cavallero ⁽⁸⁾. It was, for the moment, to Telegraph that he had conferred with Rommel and “*that interview was long and sometimes quite alive. I reserve report by letter on certain details (...)*”⁽⁹⁾ also Rommel noted the meeting, but in slightly different terms:

“In a gorge between the cliffs to the southeast of the Bay of Gazala, where around 12 December we had established our command, comes to visit me also S.E. Bastico. He is outraged by the course of the fighting. Is worried especially for the Ajdabiya area and would like to move as quickly as possible an Italian Division. Develops a very bitter discussion, during which finger, among other things, openly S.E. Bastico that I would not have consented to the removal of any Italian unity and the use of this on his part. In that case I would have remained nothing more than run the retreat across the Cyrenaica abandoning the Italians to their fate. I was convinced that we could open the street fighting, what wouldn't have succeeded to Italian units. To make a long story short, I beg that you subtract even a command to my Italian soldier. After that S.E. Bastico gives up”⁽¹⁰⁾.

The scene was in truth very undignified. To complete the picture with a last testimony on the progress of the fighting backed by XXI Corps to disengage, it is to be noted that they were defined by Navarini “*the stormy dramatic night, in which. It seemed that the strong enemy pressure along the way of the axis was at one point by the turn the folding of this sector in a disaster*” ⁽¹¹⁾. The danger was averted by good behavior by the Lombardi grouping against the British 23rd Brigade.

Soon after, Rommel ordered verbally to Gambara to occupy the positions of the *Pavia*, holding them until further notice. For his part, Bastico rushed to draw up their own guidelines, of course on the basis of the findings of the interview. First of all wished to make a clarification:

“On request from you formulated in the interview yesterday, 8 December, recognized the need for the ongoing battle is conducted-according to my directives-from a single commander, a broad interpretation of the Faculty given me by the Comando Supremo to dispatch No. 31062/Op., I have determined that, from 00:00 on 9 December today, all ground troops operating within the territory of Cyrenaica (X C.A.) pass your orders (01/20666 dispatch/op. of the 8th current) (...).

Then said the instructions received from the Comando Supremo and added some additional guidelines. In essence, the first defense of Cyrenaica had to be performance on Gazala (as already ordered from Rommel), moreover it was necessary to provide for other lines are lagging behind. On each tactical concept had to rely on the left side of the infantry units, with the edge of the sea, and on the right location of armored units, in order to maneuver against attempts at envelopment from the South. Ajdabiya had remarkable importance, therefore, was urging Italian motorized troops or send and expect a defense maneuvered in the area Ajdabiya-el Agheila-Marada and possibly Gialo, if retaken. Border defense, then, it was appropriate to be considered under the new situation: the port of Bardia had lost importance for the enemy, since the release of Tobruk until it agreed to keep that front? The last sentence of the directives of Bastico was eloquent: "*Please, Mr. General, keep me informed beforehand of your decisions*"⁽¹²⁾.

Navarini had spent 24 tiring hours. After a day of uncertainty, on the evening of 8 December *Panzergruppe* sent new orders. It was necessary that the line of Gazala-composed of an advanced position, currently held by the 90th Light and back, at the height of the locality-was quickly activated. The *Pavia* had to move to the rear before the dawn of the 9th; the *Trento*, fold your right, pivoting on Ras Medauuar, by dawn on the 9th and move to the advanced position in the night of the 10th; the *Brescia*, disengage also supplemented by the night on the 10th with the *Trento*. In doing so, to maneuver completed, the *Brescia* and *Trento* (right) were found in the first line east of Gazala, making the 90th Light that would pass into the *Panzergruppe*'s reserve. The *Pavia* in second row; the *Bologna* in reordering at about ten kilometers further West.

The movement began and took place regularly, not bothered by the opponent if not with artillery shelling against Ras Medauuar. The drawback was the unity of *Pavia*, part of which was forced to March on foot, arms pulling the pieces from 47 and 65, in view of the insufficient number of vehicles received from the Corps of Maneuver, and, during the afternoon of the 9th, fighting to fend off British Armored elements well

soon who came alive. Even the *Brescia* and *Trento* encountered some difficulties, the first for lack of vehicles and the second because it attacked the rearguard, however in the early afternoon hours of the 10th the XXI Corps were deployed as planned.

More laborious folding of the Corps of Maneuver. Accomplished a first on the Trigh Capuzzo overhang at Bir Bellefaa (five kilometers east of Bir Hakeim), around 14:00 of the 9th the *Trieste* was attacked by enemy units that are dangerously to wedge between 66th infantry and 9th bersaglieri. A battalion of *Ariete* solved the situation. In the night on 10th the Corps of Maneuver resumed the folding direction Bu Allusc, to stand at the right hand of the *Trento*. At about 08:00 of 10 December, the entire *Panzergruppe* was in the advanced positions of Gazala. (sketch, no. 79).

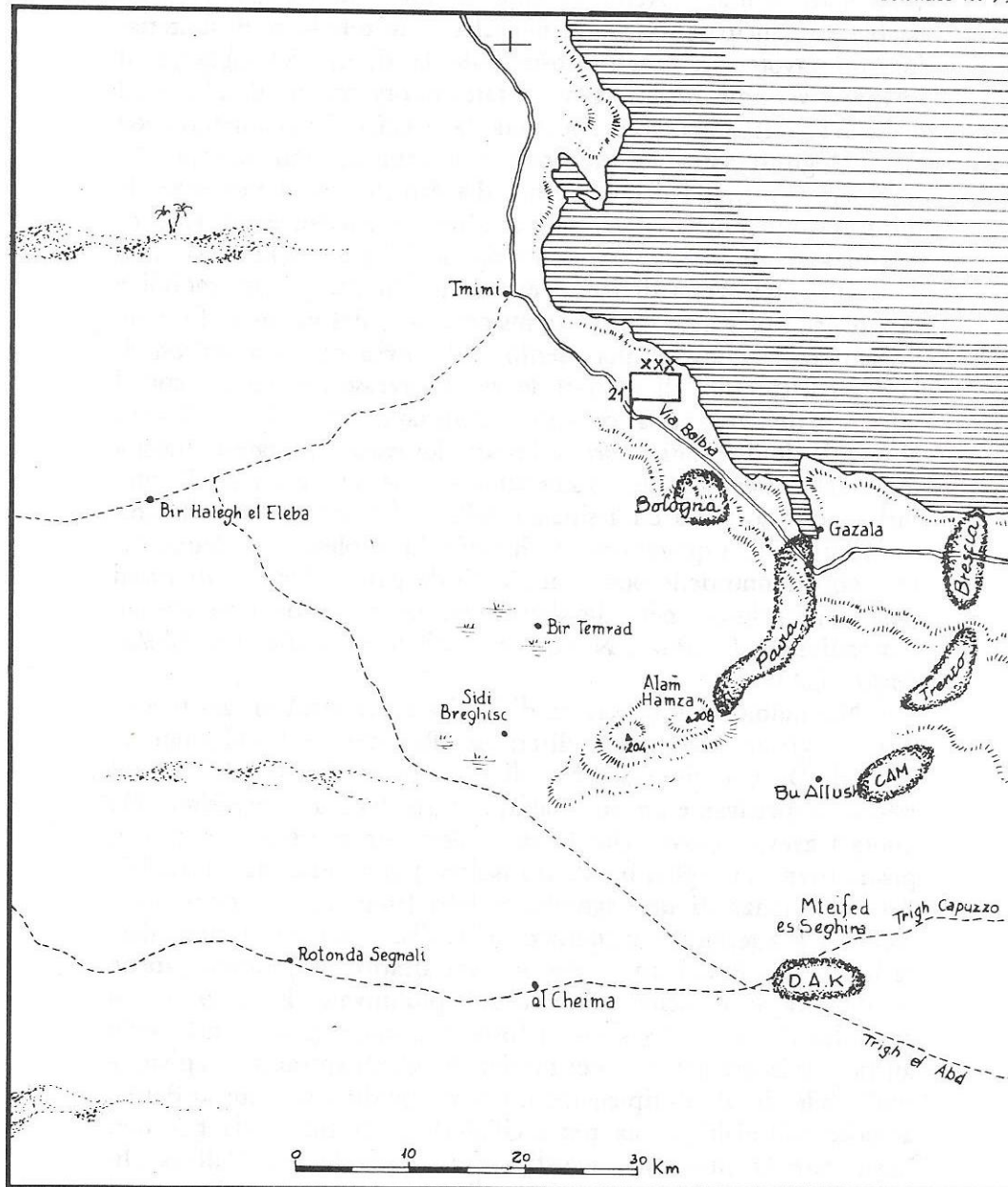
Half an hour after he arrived at the Army Corps of Maneuver an important message of Bastico: Gambara had to hand over command to the senior major general and go immediately to the Comando Superiore to resume the duties of Chief of staff. At 13:00 he succeeded the Office, to Piazzoni while Azzi assumed command of the *Trieste* ⁽¹³⁾.

More or less it would be said that things could hold, but that same evening's *Panzergruppe* mailer had a highly significant tone: "*so far the enemy pressure was weak. The general situation and the situation of supplies require a further withdrawal*". Consequently the need manifested itself to choose a rearmost position. The thing was already in the air. In the afternoon, at 16:00, Rommel had submitted to the command of CAM and had imparted to Piazzoni "*provisions concerning an eventual withdrawal on the Bir el Gtaff-hill 208-el Cheima*", i.e. South-West back to Gazala. In such circumstances, had explained before Piazzoni a topographic map on which were marked in color arrows indicating the various stages of the retreat upto in Tunis ⁽¹⁴⁾.

The morning of 11 December, at 09:00, Rommel gave a report at the tactical aviation Command at Demao Cominciò with an illustration of the State of fact. The opponent had a chance to press the via Balbia, and point to Benghazi and Ajdabiya. The *Afrikakorps* and CAM were threadbare. Fuel was scarce and this made impossible any maneuver on the right of the line. In such circumstances, therefore, the ability to save Cyrenaica became

LO SCHIERAMENTO DEL PANZERGRUPPE AD AIN EL-GAZALA
(mattino del 10 dicembre)

Schizzo n. 79



very limited. In the event of another withdrawal, the main problem was to save all infantry forces: favorable sustainable if he could defend the edge of Derna. otherwise you could 'try' to organize a line west of the city. If, as had been feared, the movement had been executed under the pressure of the enemy, there was a great leap backwards, to Syrtica. For the moment the measures to be taken were prudential nature. Firstly, the Constitution of two strong points by the *Bologna* ⁽¹⁵⁾: an advanced, in the area of Umm er-it changes, with more mobile troops and ready to fold; the other behind-intended to form the backbone of the new deployment of Division-Southeast of Derna with the task to block access roads to the city and with the support of Corps artillery. On the Gazala, *Brescia* and *Trento* divisions were in the evening to take the back of *Pavia*, ready-to-order back towards Derna, Deploying them to the right and to the left of *Bologna* and so a front of some forty kilometers in total. In particular, the abandonment of the current positions of the two divisions had to take place by "thinning", so as not to attract the attention of the enemy. No specific provision for *Afrikakorps* and CAM.

Of course the problem of Bardia took extremely serious character. Since December 6, Rommel had ordered the Generals De Giorgis and Schmitt to arrange the withdrawal of external devices on Halfaya and Bardia. At first, De Giorgis had thought that the communication refers to small places, outside the strongholds, remained isolated, then had the doubt of the imminence of an dismantling of the border. In any event, he had replied that the provision does not concern the *Savona*, whose situation was not affected although difficult because of prolonged isolation, and added that if the decision was rendered absolutely necessary for the Division-for reasons that escaped-appeared preferable that his withdrawal is done directly on Bardia instead of on Halfaya and for ease of supplies is not to make it worse the Halfaya stronghold logistics. In fact, the sea, feeding on Sollum Bassa, landing was possible but subject to the conditions of navigation and it was enough to damage the boat normally used for maritime transport of supplies to provoke a crisis, because the *Savona* lived now in the

day. In the interview of December 8 Bastico had asked why for two consecutive nights the German command had suspended air supply to the division and Rommel had poured the responsibility on refusal to fold opposite from De Giorgis, stating that he was still tending to recover somehow those troops. Therefore, the 7th, had proposed directly to the Comando Supremo any evacuation by sea of garrisons Sollum -Bardia, should it not be deemed necessary the additional defense.

The 8 December the *Panzergruppe* sent notice of folding of *Savona* on the strongholds “Faltenbacher” and “Halfaya”, whose German garrisons were vacated on Bardia. Aside from the fact that the Division would be a forward camp, the task seemed anything but straightforward, since leaving three mainstays, performing a illumed nights with difficulty down narrow passageways obliged (gaps in minefields) and exceeding the net enemy observation. The Executive order of evacuation of the strongholds “Bir Ghirba”, “Cova” and “D'Avanzo” aired on the 9th. At the same time, Cavallero responded to Bastico, approving the concept of Bardia as many forces as possible of *Savona*, but clarifying of deemed utterly impossible any evacuation by sea, except for a small number of wounded by submarines in return, after bringing supplies. And he reiterated: *"it is important for all purposes which the fort resists, even if attacked, for as long as possible"* ⁽¹⁶⁾.

In the night on the 11th most of principals it led directly to the Halfaya field, while the 15th infantry with light tanks and a assault company stopped at «Cirener». At least twenty-four hours the opponent did not notice and continued to beat the abandoned positions. The night on the 13th the «D'Avanzo» garrison will fall back on the «Cirener».

In Rome the unexpected Japanese aggression on Pearl Harbour and the situation in North Africa were subject to comments and discussions. With the intervention of Japan, according to Cavallero *"the situation has turned in our favor"*, because the ships of the Mediterranean Fleet which were sunk they had replacement and the question of Bisena could buy different connotation ⁽¹⁷⁾. Regarding the Cyrenaica, the dispatch of Bastico on interview with Rommel had aroused concerns of various

kinds. Since Leut. Col. Montezemolo had disengaged brilliantly and especially seemed to have gained some confidence from major commanders, Cavallero decided to send him back in Libya to "*see the situation and the moods*", convince everyone that the defense of Ajdabiya had importance and define the latitude of Rommel's command.

"I inform Leut. Col. Montezemolo-Cavallero wrote in his diary-that if you need to send an inquiry to the Ecc. Roatta on site (...). You have to convince SuperASI that must get along with Rommel and not put ourselves in deciding between him and Rommel, because we would be forced to give reason to the latter. So not want the Duce to be at odds with the Fuehrer".

Montezemolo departed on the 10th. Bastico had already defined the question Rommel, but without any enthusiasm. As he wrote to Cavallero

"(...) It did not present a solution: reconfirm the Gen. Rommel in command of Italian and German troops and place his orders even the few ground troops making up the X Corps. So I just did, but I believe my duty to represent you that if I had had the chance I would have adopted a different solution.

Indeed, on Gen. Rommel, in the first phase of this battle, if confirmed his qualities as a valiant general, it has certainly proved to have-at least in harmonic measurement-a commander of Army strategic (...).

I repeat therefore: no one can contest the Gen. Rommel momentum, ascending, courage, physical endurance test at all, but he is also a stubborn, that reason more often based on prejudices, then nobody will budge; that does not suffer much less orders tips (...).

What is certain is that if the three Corps, XXI, of Maneuver and German armored, were placed under direct orders of the Comando Superiore, operations might have, in my opinion, a more harmonious, more unitary and thus more profitable (...)"⁽¹⁸⁾.

The idea of abandoning Rommel *sic et simpliciter* to claim Comando Superiore structure, incidentally, was far more complex than that of a Corps Command-the conduct of operations can make me smile. However, we must point out that until then if the German General's active featured the meteoric reconquest of Cyrenaica (that no one would even dare imagine Commander) were not immune from criticism of the incursion on the border, the victory of Sidi Rezegh sterile and especially a late battle's conduct based on well-coordinated use to

mass of the mobile forces available. In other words, still had not appeared in any cheerful evidence that Rommel had any equal in that theater of operations.

The Envoy of Cavallero was very well received by Bastico, Gambara, Rommel and Kesselring, Commander of 2nd Luftflotte, who had seen fit to go also in Libya to realize local needs: "*Learned Rommel's concerns-he wrote after the war-and for the first time I was aware of the Italian-German contrasts*" ⁽¹⁹⁾. The first communication of Montezemolo about the operations was disturbing: "*(...) Outlining Supercomando concern; Rommel plans to fold more deeply than Supercomando considers it necessary for immediate action and enemy possibility (...)*" ⁽²⁰⁾.

Immediately Cavallero turned to Bastico, telling him that, in view of the clear trend of Rommel to look precarious preservation of Cyrenaica, Mussolini keeping firm concept "*that decision must be left to the Commander on site*", invited him to consider the conduct of the opponent that did not seem to express a strong pressure; the conditions of attrition of the British 8th Army; the command crisis opened because of Cunningham's replacement; the time the enemy to organize an enveloping maneuver outreach up to Ajdabiya; the next arrival of reinforcements from Italy and the ongoing influx of the II *Fliegerkorps*. This should add the strategic repercussions caused by Japanese intervention, such as the expected recall of much of the British effort to the theatre of operations in Southeast Asia.

"Please consider all this-continued Cavallero-by the Duce to General Rommel, because look at his situation and the opponent, even in light of the foregoing considerations.

The decision to keep less Cyrenaica is authorized delicate timing problem, which should be examined in place, but all cited elements are examined must be its screen. Rommel personally conferred & reported"⁽²¹⁾.

Bastico transmitted immediately and in full the dispatch to the interested party, however, contrary to the intentions of the Comando Supremo, he felt it was up to him to decide on the conduct of operations, so that in transcribing the message modified the initial phrase "*while maintaining firm concept that decision must be left to the Commander on site, Duce I*

invites you to consider (...)” in “*For Ecc. Bastico. Last decision about withdrawal from Cyrenaica is left to you. Duce invites you to consider (...)*”. Then concluded:

“Above reiterates my point of view in expressed No. 01/10680 of 9 December, viewpoint that my Chief of staff, to my Office, I have this mane confirmed and on which I am glad you have agreed.

It remains therefore intended that the Cyrenaica strenuously on defense goes to Ain Gazala.

It is therefore necessary to eradicate quickly from everyone's mind the idea of more folds; this without interrupting the already initiated organization of Derna and the retreat of arduous duty”⁽²²⁾.

Ultimately, not only it was a misinterpretation about the operating skills, but also a conceptual stiffening rather amazing, since the directives addressed to Rommel on December 9, due to the talk of the 8th, was established clearly that the first defense of Cyrenaica had to be conducted on the Gazala and which were to be provided for other folding lines. This, apart from the incongruity of all-out defense on current positions “*without interrupting the already initiated organization of Derna*”! Actually he was born a misconception. The preparations already ordered by Rommel did feel at Comando Superiore that his dominant thought was the next leap backwards. This assumption seems supported by the evacuation took place, on the back of arduous duty and medium caliber artillery, as well as the retreat on Derna, formerly carried out by a portion of the units on foot. This also left to assume that he had the secret aim of retreat at the appropriate time with the *Afrikakorps*, neglecting the fate of Italian divisions. However, Rommel was, Yes, a decision not to let bottle up in Cyrenaica, but if and as long as possible would keep hard to Gazala, partly because Kesselring had declared that from Crete could offer a valuable air to fight competition in Cyrenaica, but not in Tripolitania. Of course, having to do also and especially of the worst hypothesis, had taken precautionary measures on the back (setting up a rear position in Derna and retreat of the Intendenza organization) and in depth (sending the 90th Light-who had lost Gen. Sümmermann, mortally wounded by a bombing on the 10th - with Italian elements at Ajdabiya). This had

press release of Montezemolo in the afternoon of 11 December, declaring himself confident that "*the crisis will last until arrival however some reinforcement*" ⁽²³⁾. Ultimately, her policy depended on what would make Ritchie. Inevitably, given the unprejudiced attitude and lacking in many respects for the allies on one side and the other suspect, was to arise a new friction.

Ritchie wished to pursue the axis troops without their truce, though conceder to implement this design identified must change the structure of the army. Attributed responsibility for operations against the *Panzergruppe* with 30 Corps, which already received of Tobruk, and assigned the task of eliminating the remaining axis resistance at the border to the 13th. Norrie Immediately protested claiming that 13th Corp was the most suitable to conduct highly dynamic and operations, moreover, had been formed in view of such use, but the objection-founded-was not accepted. So Godwin-Austen was the 7th Armored Division (now with only the 4th Armored brigade), the 4th Indian Division (with 5th and 7th Brigade), the 5th New Zealand Brigade (withdrew from the border), the Polish Brigade and the 70th Division of Tobruk. Norrie was with the 1st South African Brigade, the 2nd South African Division (Gen. I.P. De Villiers) and the 1st tank Brigade. The 22nd Guards Brigade was held to directly under the Command of the army to be sent, as soon as possible on Benghazi to cut the road to the enemy.

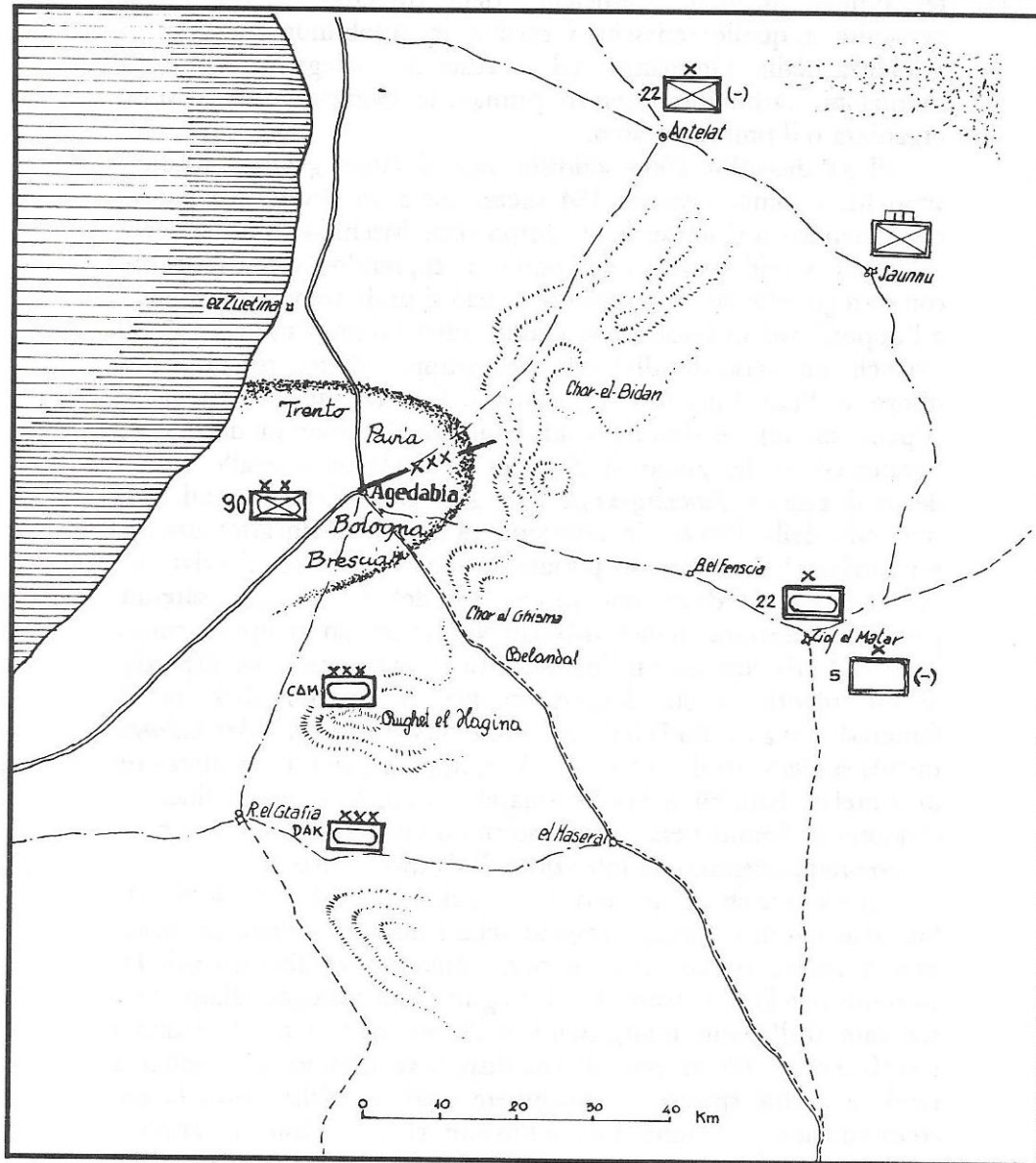
The Godwin-Austen project included a commitment from the East front with the 5th New Zealand Brigade on the coastal strip; a central attack on the escarpment, with the Polish Brigade heading north until you reach the via Balbia. a fourth Indian attack against the strong position of Alarn Harnza, extreme southern Italian static defenses; an enveloping movement by the 4th Armored brigade, South of the Trigh el Abd, with Bir Halegh el Eleba, -where would act towards Tmimi and Bir Temrad, to the back of Alam Harnza. Meanwhile the 7th support group was to engage enemy forces south of Sidi Breghisc, i.e. the Italian-German armored units ⁽²⁴⁾ (sketch No. 80).

As a result of orders given by Rommel to the relationship held the morning of the 11th at Derna, Navarini dispose folding on back of Gazala with the *Brescia* at the via Balbia, the *Pavia* on the escarpment and the *Trento*

The design of the British 13 Corp maneuver to Gazala

LO SCHIERAMENTO DEL PANZERGRUPPE AD AGEDABIA
(25 dicembre)

Schizzo n. 86



Map miss numbered

second group⁽²⁵⁾. “*New positions-operations order said of the XXI Corps-you must absolutely resist for several days*”. As for uncoupling met difficulties, especially in the area of the *Trento* ⁽²⁶⁾, the movement took place in good order and with no problems.

The Corps of Maneuver had more troubled life instead. At 16:00, Rommel had passed from the control of the corp to touch the folding that was likely to make the evening on Alam Hamza-el Cheima. Piazzoni had represented the absolute necessity to wait for refueling columns and the consequent likelihood that the movement was possible only on the following day. In fact, the *Ariete* was ready at 21:30 the same evening, but had to wait until the *Trieste* to 08:30 of the 11th just fuel. The order came from *Panzergruppe* at 14:30: at the dawn of the 12th the CAM to be on new positions. Preliminary provisions had already been given; they predicted that the *Trieste* reached hill 208 of Alam Hamza connecting with *Pavia* in the North; the *Ariete* starting an hour after the *Trieste*, occupied the front of hill 204 (included)-el Cheima taking contact with the *Afrikakorps*; the Recon grouping bring in Sidi Brehisc in reserve.

In the late afternoon had therefore beginning the withdrawal, but the next morning the Corps was interspersed. The first unit that said news of whether it was the left column of *Trieste*, sighted around 07:00 to a few kilometers away from Sidi Brehisc - where had stopped the command of CAM-messy moving westward. It consisted of the 9th bersaglieri, with other joining elements, including an artillery group of *Ariete*: had been attacked by armored car southwest of Alam Hamza and had lost contact with the Division. Piazzoni halted the column and tried the radio link with the other units. Around 10:00 knew that the bulk of the *Trieste* was placed on hill 207 realizing the tactical contact with *Pavia*, while nothing could know of *Ariete*, whose absence caused a gap South of Alam Hamza, partially covered by a veil of armored cars and tanks spread by Crüwell until the 9th bersaglieri, personally Piazzoni said.

Finally Balotta was found via radio: there was still some twenty kilometers from the point of arrival. “*I ordered Him to hasten the March-wrote Piazzoni in his report-making him look like, because of his violation of my*

orders, were in crisis around the CAM and the CTA” ⁽²⁷⁾, but only around 22:00 the *Ariete* came alive, breaking a alarming silence: was about to resume the movement towards Sidi Brehisc, 13 December At 06:15 of the Division arrived, departed with five hours of delay with the *Trieste* and on the wrong route, Yes, was headed north, ending at the rear of the *Trento*, had with him the flying batteries grouping, but the rest of the De Meo Group had lost, Piazzoni decided that the *Ariete* went immediately to take sides on hill 204 of Alam Hamza connecting with the *Afrikakorps* and the 9th bersaglieri met at their Division,

That morning Rommel gave another report at Berta, home of command of the *Panzergruppe*, *"the enemy yesterday managed to penetrate between the Pavia and the DAK-began-space where it was supposed to be the CAM, the Trieste has had many casualties (most in trucks). The situation seems now restored and apparently the opening was closed this morning"*, then expressed the hope that the Italian divisions holding of the front with a strong attack in the direction of Bir Temrad, then stated that the co-operation of the *Afrikakorps* was limited to fire, because now there were just 20-25 Pzkw,

"I intend to keep Gazala-continued-(...). A break to Tmimi would have serious consequences and would then be difficult to fold the three divisions *Pavia*, *Trento* and *Trieste*. It may well be that as a result of enemy attack you have losses without the enemy get in the evening to break, which could happen tomorrow. In this case you should provide in the night to the XXI Corps folding to fill in the morning the Derna-Sibi Greib.

In this case the *Brescia* would be at Derna and *Bologna* in Sidi Greib, with rear bases at Umm er- Rzem and at Martuba. The *Pavia*, the *Trento*, the CAM and the CTA fall back on Mechili (...). The line of defense would then Derna - Mechili - Abiar (...)"

Eventually Rommel solicited vehicles for the infantry divisions and remarked on the command organization of the Corps of Maneuver:

"There have been difficulties in the past few days in the connections with the CAM, because links have been poorly treated and CAM had a staff of C.A. with everything you need. A commander of a Division cannot control another simultaneously; There was the crisis in the change of command at an important moment. Please provide for the staff of the CAM and CAM connection with me” ⁽²⁸⁾.

The allusion to Piazzoni, which continued to be the Commander of the *Trieste* and *interim* of the CAM, it was obvious and well placed, since even the Leut. Col. Montezemolo had remained unconvinced of the situation ⁽²⁹⁾.

Rommel's relationship did not please Bastico, who, while finding the logic measures taken by the Commander's *Panzergruppe*, was convinced that behind the allegations that he beat on current line taken shelter to another retreat, even after a small local failure. In fact, had remarked that the *Afrikakorps* offered simple artillery, that competition from the 6th the *Panzerdivisionen* had not been more involved and that the number of German tanks was efficient on paper less. The focal point was the shortage of vehicles; non-mobile troops in danger of being lost. In such circumstances, Bastico again wrote to Cavallero:

“(...) In fact the General Rommel doesn't think and doesn't care that the folding.

At every meeting, every conversation is only projects-forces deployment on the Derna-Mechili, then on the Bena-Chaulan-Gerrari, then the defense of Benghazi and Ajdabiya; lines that change every day and every hour.

The fierce defense of Ain Gazala line does not speak ever; if forced to talk about it cares only for motor vehicles, fearing they could not vacate the XXI C.A. in time (...). In short, you have the feeling that this defense is not on his belief and who do not take it seriously (...).

I therefore feel that the General Rommel now worry not only wear down further its divisions, leaving the greatest weight of the battle to the already very try Italian divisions; and I can't even rule out the possibility that, if a reverse serious were to rule, he folds the armored divisions first to Mechili and el-Abiar on Benghazi, creating a seamless crisis Italian troops, for vehicle deficiency, could not follow him (...).”

Because he was persuaded that on the Gazala position you could resist for a long time, he decided to leave no stone unturned in order to convince Rommel to accept a fight to the bitter end, but knowing him, estimated affordable personal intervention of Mussolini ⁽³⁰⁾.

We say frankly that the conviction of Bastico (or, more probably, that of Gambara) to support an arrest is lawful battle pose many reservations. However, that day-13 December-the British took more serious activities consistency across the front, particularly in the stretch of the *Pavia*

(by the Polish Brigade) and *Trieste* (by the 4th Indian Division). Despite some local success reported by the enemy, the situation was controlled, however, reporting on the day's fighting to the *Panzergruppe* and to the Comando Superiore, Navarini represented that if tomorrow the fight was resumed with some intensity the *Pavia* would certainly resisted on the spot, but you could exclude any dynamic reaction on the part of the *Trento*, also for lack of many weapons and ammunition shortages. Among other things, the 20th infantry *Brescia* was sent to Derna.

Far more delicate was the location of the *Trieste*, as have most naturally hard positions. The *Panzergruppe* had bothered to ensure close cooperation between the two Corps thus armored, had established to give orders to both through Crüwell. Of these, around 10:00 of that same morning, he went from Piazzoni, who found himself in conversation with Nisio, and requested information. Informed of the state of fact, of losses incurred from the *Trieste* and the need for a reordering after sensitive confusion caused by the retrograde march, by radio link failure and persistent activity of recon elements and enemy artillery, Crüwell decided the concentration of the entire Corp at Alam Hamza: the *Trieste* to hill 208 and the *Ariete* to hill 204. Also assured him that, in order to lighten the pressure on the *Trieste* and to allow an easier acquisition of hill 204, in the afternoon would have launched a raid against the 4th Indian Division.

Moreover, there were objective difficulties due to distinctly aggressive attitude of the opponent and infiltrations are everywhere. Just that morning hill 204 had been taken by surprise by the I *Royal East Kent Regiment* (the *Buff's*) of 5th Indian Brigade, who had shocked the I/66th infantry, recently arrived and not yet oriented. And shortly after hill 208 was attacked. While the *Trieste* repelled the Indian effort, strongly urged by Balotta, Piazzoni, moved to regain hill 204. There he managed. It was even difficult to build an accurate picture of the situation; the same command of the *Afrikakorps* was busy gives "*fifty tanks coming from the South*" and demanded a contest to extricate. It was necessary to postpone the operation against hill 204 the next day.

Actually the *Afrikakorps* was found struggling with the 7th Indian Brigade. The Gen. Briggs was heading towards Sidi Breghisc

when he met a deep depression in the ground; wanted to bypass it and this brought him close to the command of the *Afrikakorps*. Considering an advanced element, gave the order to remove the obstacle. However, while the 25th campaign artillery, IV/11th *Sikh* had based on departure and twelve *Valentine* of the 8th *Royal Tanks* preparing to support the *Sikhs*, came all Crüwell had on hand the 21st *Panzer*. The *Sikhs*, still on Board of vehicles, quickly withdrew behind the 25th artillery and *Valentine*. The action began at about 15:00 and the dusk prevented the Germans to break the barrier of guns and British tanks. When the *Panzer* retreated, the enemy claimed to have hit 14 Pzkw.

In the late afternoon Rommel summoned Montezemolo for 20:00 to the command of *Panzergruppe*. The interview lasted an hour and was very explicit. Montezemolo said it immediately at a glance ⁽³¹⁾, then in detail ⁽³²⁾. In essence, Rommel was the critical moment, because the enemy pressed and was recovering faster than the Italian-German army. Couldn't resist along at Gazala, was still only for one day, as reinforcements arrived. Now, the goal to be achieved could not be the one to destroy on the line to lose then Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, but defend the Tripolitania to prevent Ritchie reached the Tunisia. As a result, had decided to gradually withdraw. The Dar was strong and covered the Western Cyrenaica: "*Maybe it worn enemy if it does not receive strong reinforcements and we reach something*". But Rommel had also said clearly to believe that "*il Duce has left him full freedom of movement throughout Cyrenaica et that keep decision or not later both lines of its competence in respect of the situation of the moment.*" The divergence of views between Bastico and Rommel Yes based essentially on the appreciation that the Italian divisions, with no vehicles or nearly so, they lost everything in the next rush and Ajdabiya would come only the *Afrikakorps* and something of the Corp of Maneuver. "*Divergence is irreducible -concluded Montezemolo – because both views have strong foundations*" and proposed a personal telegram from Mussolini to Rommel, who invited him to defend the Cyrenaica for as long as possible: he might be buying time waiting for reinforcements, and to allow a more orderly retreat.

As you can imagine, Bastico reacted immediately with a message to Cavallero:

“The tendency of Rommel to retreat on the Derna line & which increases hour by hour. All attacks made by the enemy on the Gazala were rejected. This confirms me in thinking that Gazala line may be further maintained.

For Ecc. Cavallero: hasty withdrawal under enemy pressure would put in the most critical situation, artillery troops and vehicles that cannot make use of trucks of which there is extreme shortage. Since General Rommel insists in assuming his responsibility to decide, while folding in my opinion sentence contained the 11th current 31089 telegram ' decision must be left at the site Commander” - reserving the decision itself, I pray you orders. Reply urgently needed”⁽³³⁾.

The 14th the *Trieste* began to breathe. Was collected around hill 208, with a semicircle of battalion strong points, facing South, East and North-East; enemy efforts had been thwarted; the units were settling more organically; human losses suffered between the 11th and 13th amounted altogether to about 700 men, but the morale was satisfactory. *Ariete*, on the other hand, was still searching for the best arrangement. His new attack launched at noon against hill 204 met a violent reaction by artillery and tanks; take back over the course of the afternoon, after a *Stuka* raid, managed to allow tactical link with the *Trieste*, although rather randomly because of significant gaps exist between static structures. To keep in mind that Balotta was left with only 14 efficient tanks.

However, events could turn for the worse was unclear to many. In the night on the 14th Navarini had issued an order with guidance for possible further withdrawal, placing doubt the evacuation than strictly necessary for combat. But at 11:00 took place at a meeting between Shearwater Bastico and Rommel. These expressed again his thesis "- *avoid in all ways the encirclement and annihilation of our strengths*" and denied to advocate a retreat purely for pessimism: " *when I get to Mechili the two armored Corps, plus Trento and Pavia, I'll stick the enemy and the annihilate them*" promise. The discussion was at one point uncertain when it arrived a communication that cut the bull head: a column of about 100 vehicles had penetrated between *Pavia* and the *Trieste* and at the same time, the *Afrikakorps* was. attacked by 7th Armored Division. Rommel resumed: " *not is that unravel and lead us quickly into the Tmimi area, otherwise we lose other divisions (...). The two Italian Corps communicated that aren't able to counterattack with their forces (...)*".

Gambara dug into a stubborn refusal, which is not supported by convincing arguments, it must be said, but Bastico accepted the viewpoint of Rommel ⁽³⁴⁾:

“General Bastico-telegraphed instantly Montezemolo at the Comando Supremo -after a long but peaceful conversation with Rommel, gave it right back at his opinion from Gazala, prescribing to adapt to the times and modes of non-mobile troops. ⁽³⁵⁾ .

The rebuttal of the urgency of the measure was suffered by the XXI Corps. At 14:30 Navarini received an explicit question from *Panzergruppe*: Seen necessary come to the break of contact, the XXI Corps believed it must had beginning in the night on 15th? The answer was in the affirmative: the pressure on the front of *Pavia* it was fighting very well-was very strong, so it seemed appropriate to disengage as soon as possible. However it was necessary that the CAM would eliminate the numerous enemy infiltration together until Bir Temrad. Even the CAM had received similar questions, but had replied negatively. In his opinion, the withdrawal was not necessary, but the Corps would attack the following morning, as orders received from Crüwell. What were the guidelines of Rommel, Gause was that the entire army was heavily engaged, so under these circumstances, it was not possible to think retreat. It was necessary to hold in place, at least for all of 15 December. Meanwhile, *Bologna* and 20th infantry *Brescia* were employed by the X Corps (Gen. Benvenuto Gioda).

The situation was beginning to be clear for Godwin-Austen. It was obvious that Messervy had faced the toughest and most delicate point: the seam between static defense and mobile defenses of the axis. It was also clear that the 4th Armored brigade was too South to act within the framework of a useful coordination of efforts. The 14:00 attacks led the support group against *Afriakorps* and the 4th Indian Division against *Trieste* and *Pavia* were inconclusive. It was necessary to concentrate forces and means. The 15th - 13Corps was very simple: to reiterate the frontal attack of Messervy, employing all infantry tanks of Willison, and resolutely push forward along the side discovered the enemy until you reach behind him, the 4th Armored Brigade. It seemed that the German Recon groups touch the Trigh

El-Abd and Gatehouse had to do some 40 kilometres to the West, keeping South of the track, then bend at right angles to the North and reach Halegh el Eleba-(altogether about 110 kilometers) within hours. At that time the 5th Indian Brigade of Russel could start the new attack on hill 208, to take it out before noon. The Polish Brigade and 5th New Zealand Brigade were tasked to act against the right of the *Brescia* and *Pavia* on the left-hand side of the escarpment (sketch No. 81).

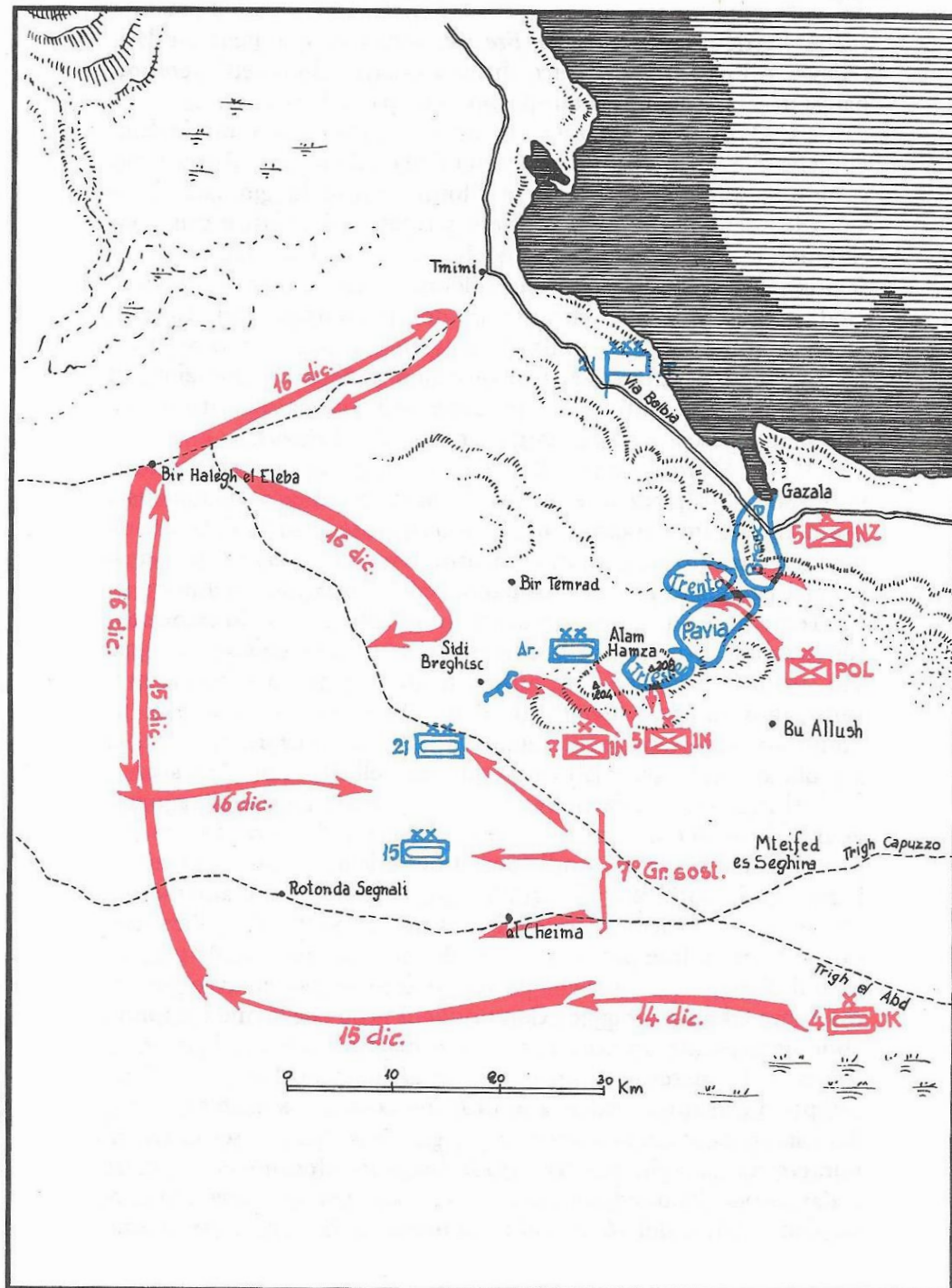
The whole morning spent in clam. Navarini divisions organized contact breakage; the *Trieste* was able to bring to hill 208 also 9th bersaglieri; the *Ariete* was preparing to move against hill 204 and *Afrikakorps* with a large round had brought the intervention distance from hill 204. At noon, Rommel held meeting at XXI Corp command, at Umm er-Rzem, modifying the orientations already announced partially: to Gazala had to remain for the entire 15th and also for December 16. The withdrawal would be carried out in the night on the 17th. In the early afternoon it heralded the British action, but immediately recorded the empty punch. The 4th Armored Brigade was still far from the objective: met a path much more accidental than planned, had had to stop twice to refuel and was not able to affect even indirectly on the fight for Alam Hamza. The 5th Indian Brigade attempted to expand the success of the *Bufs*, but soon saw these attacked by the I/132nd Tank (which had brought together all thirty efficient M 13 of the regiment) and the XII/8th bersaglieri and, at 15:00, from 15th *Panzer* (which had twenty-three tanks). Russel the fray that remained, though the, III and V bersaglieri battalion repulsed every attempt of reduction. At 15:30 the 5th Indian Brigade retreated disastrously upset, having lost a thousand men (among dead, wounded and prisoners, some forty pieces, many vehicles and various material. Even hill 208, where III/1st *Punjab* supported by *Valentine* was fierce against the strongholds of the *Trieste*, the action had failed. To complete the day unfavorable Messervy, the 7th Indian Brigade, conducted on Sidi Breghisc, had been arrested by the V bersaglieri battalion, which after brief fighting had clearly repelled.

To the Northeast, one of the Polish Brigade against the left of the *Pavia* had obtained some advantage, not least because in the vicinity of the boundary of the sector with *Brescia*. As this effort grew and led to the rupture of line

The battle of Gazala (13-16 December)

I COMBATTIMENTI DI AIN EL-GAZALA
(13-16 dicembre)

Schizzo n. 81



of the 27th infantry, between the via Balbia found here and, while the far right of *Brescia*, attacked by New Zealanders, yielded. At dusk the gap of about four kilometers achieved in this way was buffered by units of the *Trento*.

The 4th Armored Brigade was meanwhile reached Bir Halegh el Eleba-to 15:00, but with the head of the column, the tanks empty and none likely to be replenished by the day. Not wanting to risk that the tanks were surprised so isolated and with little fuel, Gott allowed Gatehouse to return South the next morning to meet the supply columns. When Godwin-Austen knew that before the afternoon of the 16th could not count on the 4th Armored Brigade, he resigned and that it attacked the enemy as soon as conditions to do so, to give breath to the 4th Indian Division but mainly to enforce the weight of his seventy tanks on the *Afrikakorps*.

On December 16 did not take place any action that could satisfy the Commander of British 13 corps. Gatehouse, before returning back, sent a squadron to Tmimi, where in a brief clash put out some means before retiring due to lack of fuel, and a second squadron on Bir Temrad, where he met units of the 15th *Panzer* which repulsed with losses. The bulk of the Brigade had do 25 kilometers to the South, it found the B echelon coming, it supplied and turned eastward. Who had come across in a deployment of German artillery, stopped and was limited to an exchange of gunfire. The battle where *tanks* could outmaneuver the Axis tanks there was remaining.

To the displeasure of Godwin-Austen consequently joined the disappointment at the failure of the *Western Desert Air Force*: partly due to weather conditions, sometimes bad; in part because of the difficulty of establishing a line of bombardment, after which the aircraft could safely bomb the opposing; in part, finally for the easy identification of troops not, given the operational design that included winding seepage and a short and wide range. However, little was accomplished was equally substantial weight, or rather confirmed the fears of Rommel. The presence of a armor at Bir Halegh el Eleba envisaged-with clearly the probability of an encirclement and annihilation; Moreover, in four weeks of uninterrupted battle had missed the flow of supplies by sea and the Italian-German aircraft had fuel for one more mission. On 8 December at 16:00, the *Panzergruppe* sent out

executive orders to retreat. The XXI Corps would move to Tmimi the *Pavia* (at dusk) and *Trento* (at midnight), while *Brescia* would go directly to Derna turning to dependency of X Corp. The Tmimi line was to be held possibly throughout the day of the 17th, then the Corps would be withdraw up the bump only up to Berta and reorder, would go to Benghazi, with the task of defending it. The X Corps retained the positions of Derna with *Bologna* and *Brescia* and the mobile medium caliber artillery available. The *Afrikakorps* and the Corp of Maneuver are parties operating in the afternoon at Mechili.

There is to say that even a decision taken, the situation in the field of Gazala remained precarious. At about 10 a.m., the New Zealanders and Polish attempts resumed on *Pavia* and *Brescia* made it necessary, local counterattacks and with 7th bersaglieri of the *Trento*. After a long break, showed up again a very difficult moment. At 16:00 with Gen. De Stefanis signaled Navarini that the *Trento* was recoiling when facing a concentrated effort of infantry and tanks of the Polish Brigade (Gen. Bansal, Deputy Commander of the Division, had fallen mortally wounded). Another counterattack reported the situation in balance, but it was. unstable equilibrium. In the evening, to the breaking of contact, the use of ordered Navarini motorized tactical complex sent for that purpose by the *Panzergruppe*. It was formed by the XLIV bersaglieri battalion with two batteries of 88, and was under the protection of this valiant battalion that the divisions were able to disengage.

2. THE MANEUVER OF RETREAT ON AJDABIYA (18-24 DECEMBER).

Serious contrast of views between Italian and German commanders in Libya- which already before the operation *Crusader* about the assessment of British operational possibilities, then during the battle, with the action carried out by Rommel to get command of all troops in Cyrenaica and finally, more openly, in talks of 8 and 14 December- was also well known at the Comando Supremo. No wonder the Mussolini's decision to send on the spot Cavallero in order to heal the conflict and imposed authority. Of course

the situation had been discussed, especially in light of the loss for torpedoing of the steamers *Del Greco* and *Finzi* with two German tank companies and a Italian tank battalion on which immediate expectations, was the night on 13. On balance, Cavallero increasingly inclined to retreat to Agedabia. *"I inform the Duce-wrote in his diary-that unless we nurture with strength, these troops will run out, so I agree on the idea of a withdrawal."*

He came flying in Cyrenaica on the afternoon of 15 December. The next morning he went to Cyrene for a preliminary interview with Bastico and Gambara. These held to clarify immediately the situation seemed satisfactory, at least at the moment: after a somewhat eventful "folding", the line at Gazala was great on the right, where the two armored Corps were well; as for the decline of *Pavia*, the *Trento's* ongoing counterattack would eliminate the Polish and New Zealand penetration. In particular, Gambara insists that the situation had always been good, that withdrawal from Bir el Gobi was not necessary and that the troops were not under such conditions as to having to abandon Gazala. It was clear the stance against Rommel. Cavallero began with the observation that one could not ignore certain political reasons: the OKW had wanted that the command of the troops on the Cyrenaican front given to Rommel, and also it was very difficult to change it. Apart from that, it was necessary to take note of the recent major loss of two steamers with their precious cargo of tanks ⁽³⁶⁾ and live up to two full stops: delay as much as possible the British advance because *"external events could play in the future in a favorable direction"* and stop at el Agheila-Marada Ritchie's offensive. Then, he invited his audience to ponder the matter before resuming the conversation in the afternoon.

Gathered again at 14:00, Bastico took his word declaring no be longer discussion or decision, as Rommel had already given orders to fold that night to Derna. In the delicate circumstances in which it was located, had had to adapt to this solution to avoid a rupture with the German. However, at the invitation of Cavallero, to reconsider the problem without preconceptions and without given orders, in order to convince yourself that the alternative supported by Rommel was objectively dictated by strategic, tactical and situation after

long discussion Bastico did admit that there remained nothing but fold slowly. On the other hand, at that time it was impossible to stop. Instead Gambarà stiffened to declare a mistake dropping to Gazala: in his view it was necessary to fight to the bitter end, by congregating around what could be had in Cyrenaica, while bringing to Ajdabiya available forces in Tripolitania. *“Otherwise-he claimed-going back a step by step would have lost everything.”*

Cavallero observed that for well defend the Ajdabiya-Marada were indispensable elements of a certain power, which did not exist in Tripolitania was thinkable receive quickly from Italy. So it was that draw them into operating units in Cyrenaica. To this objection, opposed the repeated affirmation Gambarà he would not able also to bring back the troops necessary to garnish the Ajdabiya line firmly and that he staked everything on Gazala, *“then, fatally, if the reinforcements arrived, it would have prolonged the agony”*. Cavallero did not accept the speech to play the last card to Gazala defense of Libya and returned to report the problem on the fundamental point: defend Tripolitania. In the end, opposite the bitterness expressed by their spokesman for apprehension to Rommel and their dissent about the *Panzergruppe* Commander initiatives, cut short. *“Even if we suffer together for a situation where we are, - saying - not always remember us (...). Did you instead put into a mood of continuous reaction!”* and apprehended should bring the directives issued by Bastico, put out that Rommel was doing exactly what they expected and that such directives were very clear and undisputed from danger of equivocal interpretations.

At the end of the meeting, knew that the had arrived Mar. Kesselring, he went to Berta to find Rommel. The picture presented by these was simple and, all in all, optimistic: the XXI Corps was retreating to Tmimi and Derna, the *Afrikakorps* and the Corps of Maneuver on Mechili. Had some difficulty for the transport of *Trieste*, which had lost many vehicles; He hoped however to bring almost everything back. He appeared very difficult, however, to retain possession of Cyrenaica because the enemy was receiving continual reinforcements and it seemed that the British 10th Armored Division was flowing from Syria. The previous day, the German aerial reconnaissance had reported about 3,000 vehicles in the area of Sidi Barrani.

These forces could enter the field within two or three days ⁽³⁷⁾, while by the German-Italian stocks just enough fuel for the movement to Ajdabiya, almost no scope for engaging in a serious fight. His objective, therefore, the need not to delay moving to avoid compromising the defense of Tripolitania to el Agheila-Marada, although the line, West of Buerat Syrtica, would offer the best chance of water and simply leave the opponent in the desert. Perhaps, indeed, you could consider the appropriateness of keeping the mobile forces, Syrtica by pulling the bulk of infantry at Buerat, where it would be surrounded, meanwhile, what little they could still be derived from Tripolitania. However, for the reconquest of Gialo it was necessary to wait for the arrival of tanks, gasoline and supplies.

Cavallero, meanwhile, held to confirm repeatedly that, according to Mussolini, the main purpose rather than the defense of Tripolitania, but had to abandon the more slowly Cyrenaica to gain time and to ensure the removal of all materials. Kesselring, speaking later, announced that the formations of 2 *Luftflotte* were being accommodated in Sicily and soon the course of the war in the Mediterranean would be improved. He also retain Derna and especially the airport because other fields very far, consumption of these would have allowed fewer number of actions.

At 09:30 the 17th took place in Berta, at the command of the *Panzergruppe* a meeting convened by Cavallero. Rommel initially summarized the essential elements of the situation, repeating substantially what was said the previous afternoon and noted that the troops, despite having fought very well even in recent days, were now exhausted and were not longer able to fight in the open, while the enemy could operate at will, bringing forward new means and new tanks. It seemed, had already more than 150 between *cruisers* and infantry tanks. He said, however, intend to keep for as long as possible the Derna-Mechili and position in front of the Airport (el-Ftéjah).

If the enemy had exercised his main effort against Derna, would perhaps be possible to attack it to the side and on the rear, even with the help of aviation. If, as most likely,

he had pressed with the mass against Mechili and further South to reach Ajdabiya, would be retiring quickly in order to garnish substantially Ajdabiya, leaving in place simply rearguards.

Rommel believed that the arrival by air of anti-tank weapons would return some troops fighting efficiency. "*Hope to get reinforcements*, he said-*we have not yet abandoned, but long wait unnecessarily.*" Cavallero, after repeated that " Tripolitania was to be defended at all cost and the Cyrenaica as long as possible," he concluded:

"We must hold the Derna-Mechili Berta line - for as long as possible. The Comando Superiore A.S. will move to Ajdabiya everything that you can draw from Tripolitania; We will try to send with each medium anti-tank battalion, aviation gasoline, and then aviation, under high leadership of Marshal Kesselring, as obsolete cases will the task. For the transport will see what will be the result of ongoing convoy; But even though partly it doesn't reach, this does not change anything to our decisions; repeat our efforts for all roads including Tunisia, to ensure the necessary supplies". ⁽³⁸⁾.

Among the topics of the second plan, not mentioned in the minutes of the Conference, there is one that deserves to be harvested: Gambarà's proposal to disband the Corps of Maneuver, passing the *Ariete* and *Trieste* to the direct command of Crüwell, in order to use the command officers. It is difficult to comment properly, especially bearing in mind that the proposal came from those who had once called for the creation of large unit involved and had requested the command (while retaining the demanding function Chief of the G.S. of the Comando Superiore). Anyway the question fell immediately by Rommel, who said openly that they disagree and prefer that the CAM was such ⁽³⁹⁾.

After the meeting, Cavallero and Bastico traveled to see the XXI Corps. At about 14:00, at the junction of Martuba, found Navarini who reported on the progress of the operations: the units had very good beating, but had suffered serious losses, yes lots and be very reduced in efficiency. Of the *Pavia*, the 27th infantry had remained cut off, though a battalion had already been recovered and a second seemed to come too; now the Division marched along the via Balbia to Berta. The *Trento* had two difficult moments that had requested his personal intervention, but had recovered well and hurry guns complements of 75 mm.

Cavallero and Bastico left Martuba and returned back. A few kilometers from Berta met Rommel, who stopped them to communicate the sighting by the reconnaissance of a long column of vehicles from Acroma to Bir Tengeder (South of Mechili). It seemed so obvious which of the two solutions, move with the bulk along the via Balbia, or circumvent the *gebel*, Ritchie had chose the latter, making use of the new troops, reported a couple of days before in the area of Sidi Barrani. In such circumstances, Rommel believed essential to accelerate the withdrawal to avoid encirclement in the *gebel*. Cavallero was limited to detect as it was necessary first of all ascertain the news and then sift well the extent of the column ⁽⁴⁰⁾, before you change the decision taken this morning. Of course, if the news had been true, he would have a free hand.

He returned to Cyrene, Cavallero commissioned Montezemolo of bear to Rommel a written communication, in which, referring to the State of extreme fatigue of the Italian infantry and impossible to unite the needed vehicles, essentially repeats the considerations just expressed: before changing the agreements reached should carefully evaluate the accuracy and scope of the threat to Mechili. At Berta, Rommel received Montezemolo at 20:30 and told him that there was no more time to lose, "*the situation is so changed that only the speed can save us. It seems certain now that the enemy march towards Agedabla, pressing down with fewer forces along the via Balbia, to add further that the enemy fleet was at sea with all his strength, and that brings with it a large number of steamers and is to assume that the enemy might attempt a major landing, no one knows where, maybe West of Aghelia (...). We must concentrate forces to be able to stand up to the enemy action on Ajdabiya*". As a result, the *Afrikakorps* and CAM had been ordered to proceed immediately to el-Abiar; the other two Corps were to leave in contact with strong enemy rearguards, motorized withdraw as soon as possible on Benghazi: the X Corps for the Northern *gebelica* and the XXI to the South. Dismounted troops had to be brought back, with all available means, to rush up to Benghazi ⁽⁴¹⁾. On the evening of 18 December, it was necessary to evacuate that existed to the East of Beda Littoria-Maraua, except the motorized rearguards, able to disengage even if pressed by the enemy. Rommel admitted the chance to defend the rim of *gebel* East of Benghazi, you

to allow the evacuation of the city. Worried about the safety of the Comando Superiore, you would have seen the shift to Tripoli, which would have enabled to more effectively draw Bastico from Tripolitania more resources to fuel the fight. Of course I said that this would enable him, Rommel, to take the Italian Command.

Montezemolo hastened to return to Cyrene and to report the conversation. Bastico and Gambara did not believe the merits of German news source on the opponent and also for this reopened the discourse on folding. The same Cavallero, very puzzled and giving credit to the non-existence of real danger wide-ranging, came to consider excessive the apprehension of Rommel on the speed with which the British army could accomplish the enveloping movement and decided to come personally under the command of *Panzergruppe*. Indeed, asked Kesselring to intervene himself.

Rommel had not then all the twists in accepting the results of his aerial reconnaissance. In fact, on the evening of the 15th was out at sea, from Alexandria, the naval formation of the Adm. Vian: three cruisers and seven destroyers, tasked with escorting the ship *Breconshire* — loaded with precious fuel for Malta. The 16th the formation had been sighted by a German reconnaissance aircraft—that the *Breconshire* mistaken for a battleship—and because the took place a simultaneous case raid of a patrol of the *Long Range Desert Group* on the Airport of Tamet (West of Sirte) during which the five aircraft were torched and three others damaged, the coincidence appeared linked to a hypothesis of landing. In addition, the evening of the 16th sailed from Malta two cruisers and six destroyers of Force K to meet Vian.

At 23:00, therefore, met at Berta military leaders: Cavallero, Bastico, Marchesi, Navarini and Gambara for the Comando Superiore; Kesselring, Rommel and Gause for the *Panzergruppe*. Rommel was read by Westphal the interception of the day. From talks between the commands of the 8th Army and 13 Corps, it seemed that the enemy was determined to attack German and Italian armored forces considered weak task of Godwin-Austen was to pursue the retreating Axis forces, short-range bypassing the South wing where he found strong resistance. It seemed there were many doubts of the intent of a British wide-ranging winding. Among other things, according to the Navy, the Mediterranean Fleet was out of

Alexandria with 3 battleships, 6 cruisers and 11 destroyers ⁽⁴²⁾. In addition, a formation composed of a battleship, 8 torpedo boats and 30 small fighter ships from 1,000-2,000 tons with a tanker, were moving to likely actions of landing on the coast. Here intervened Kesselring and Marchesi. The first was to clarify that the battleships were certainly less than indicated by the news and that, as in the ports of Taranto and Brindisi had been spotted preparing Italian convoys ⁽⁴³⁾, probably the British fleet was not much put out to escort a convoy to offend the Italians. The Commander of the 5th Air Fleet, for its part, informed him that the three torpedo bombers at 16:00 had encountered and attacked a battleship ⁽⁴⁴⁾, four cruisers, and ten destroyers to about 130 miles north of Benghazi. A cruiser had been hit and an aircraft down. At 16:30 had left other torpedo bombers, which had found the British Fleet in contact with the Italian ⁽⁴⁵⁾.

Kesselring then resumed the remarks. In aerial reconnaissance complex in the afternoon confirmed the interception of the *Panzergruppe*. The forces directed to Mechili could be assessed to a Division; some elements were moving further South. The next day what he would do is concentrate the air strikes in the area, acting from Derna and Maraua and with the assistance of heavy bombers from Greece. Specified in that regard that Rommel had announced in the afternoon that he had prepared for the withdrawal to Benghazi and that he had to make the air operation on this decision.

Cavallero, while recognizing implicitly that the threat detected by Rommel had some foundation, argued that the movement of Italian infantry seemed to him too quick and he preferred to move behind the *Afrikakorps* and CAM's hand in hand with that of X and XXI Corps. After a couple of days, probably, would be made available to other trucks and was then able to move more quickly. Kesselring was to talk back. If it really was the British envelopment, he said, it was necessary to prevent it at all costs, so it became imperative that the CAM and the *Afrikakorps* was quick to Ajdabiya in order to prevent the enemy. At Mechili, according to Rommel, could remain three motorized patrols to reinforcement of the Italian battalion, garrison therein. Since in the opinion of Bastico, these forces would not have meant a serious obstacle, Gambara proposed

leave at Mechili the *Ariete* and *Trieste*, with the task to replicate more slowly to protect the flank of the four infantry divisions, already much sacrificed in earlier fighting.

Cavallero tried an intermediate solution: i.e., leave only the *Trieste* at Mechili, calculating that at X and XXI Corps would have incurred one week to arrive in Benghazi. In such circumstances, Kesselring remarked, in five or six days it would have been possible to fold, controlling the few tracks from the desert led to *gebel*, the same forces of XXI Corps who appeared in excellent condition of morality. Navarini, in that regard, it stated that the movement could be accomplished quickly, but also sacrificing services (hospitals, ovens, workshops, etc.) and the heavy artillery (materials of 149/12 and 149/35). With trucks with trailer, losses were limited. Eventually he concluded that a decision on quickness to impress the withdrawal would be taken with more elements the following day, after noon, after that is still controlled by the British move on Ajdabiya⁽⁴⁶⁾.

Everything on the basis of the Italian report. Rommel gave a different version in tone and in substance. For objectivity, you should mention it:

“At 23:00 reappeared at my command post with Marshal Kesselring, S.E. Bastico and General Gambara, and asked me with vivid words to revoke the order to retreat. Didn't see the need to retreat and also feared that the loss of Cyrenaica would derive political consequences for il Duce. Kesselring endorsed much Cavallero and relieved that it was impossible to give up the airfield of Derna. I, however, remained adamant and said that there was nothing more to change my decision. The orders had already been given and partly in progress. If the armored group didn't want to expose yourself to complete annihilation, which remained open nothing the way battling through the enemy during the night. That thereafter the Cyrenaica cannot long be kept was something that I realize clearly, as political problems that could ensue. But I was only in front of the problem to remain where I was sacrificing the armored group and losing the Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, or performing on the night the retreat, open the fighting until around Ajdabiya and defend at least Tripolitania. This could only be the decision. S.E. Bastico and Gambara behaved in a particularly lively that night in my room, so much so that in the end I saw forced to ask Bastico as, in his capacity as Commander of forces in Northern Africa, wanted to dominate the situation of the moment. Bastico escaped the question, stating that as top commander was not there to expose his views in this regard; He could only say that it was appropriate to maintain the force. In the end the Commission left my command post without having achieved anything.”⁽⁴⁷⁾.

On both sides you can see gaps and distortions. Rommel was on the spot to the understandable pride of having supported their ideas against all and that he had then proved the validity of his reasons; the synthesis of Comando Superiore tends to report the main stops, slipping on the personal contrasts. Wanting to make an impression, it can be said that the crux of the matter was to accept the threat of winding, because both sides shared this fear. It was more or less resistance from opposing on *gebel* or in the desert, because both knew that desert Ritchie -as well as O'Connor would play decisive cards; It consisted of abandonment or less of Cyrenaica, because both were willing or resigned themselves to losing it. The true focal point was constituted by dismounted infantry, Rommel would try to save without compromising the Armoured Corps (and especially the *Afrikakorps*) and Bastico-Gambara would save at risk of compromise even armored Corps (especially the *Afrikakorps*).

The issue of withdrawal of X and XXI Corps had not been examined in depth by the Comando Superiore. Not that it was his tight task-the study would have been the responsibility of the *Panzergruppe*, leading the retreating maneuver — but, given that it was the subject of fierce debate, becomes a jarring the read these lines in the diary kept by Cavallero:

"I appeal to Gen. Bastico and Gambara to clarify, based on concrete data, how long will it take for the movement of C.A. X and XXI. These data do not come with accuracy. Gambara about three or four days. .

Finally, partial discussions by saying that to C.A. XXI and X it takes six, seven days to fall back on Benghazi".

Aside from the "eye" evaluation, it is certain that the value of every day or even every hour, could actually be decisive for the success of the operation. Then, a week was "late". Pulling, however, conclusions, one must admit with Rommel that his people went "without anything".

Cavallero had mind sufficiently free from preconceptions and thought to the problem during the night and what he had heard from various commanders. The next morning, at Cyrene, decided to put a full stop to the other. "*That the State of things* -I wrote in diary- on Gen. Rommel has a clear vision of

maneuver to be carried out, that maybe his risk warnings that threaten our troops are also a little overdone to shake Supercomando, reluctant to give orders to offset the heavy elements, services. I believe that the utmost harmony of souls all make every effort to ensure that the movements are in the best way". So at 09:30 summoned Bastico, Gambara and Manca. First of all you did bring the data that had requested the night before. The situation was thus expressed:

institutions \vehicles	Efficient	Vehicles ceded or available	engaged
Intendenza Superiore	445	250	195
Del. Intendenza Cyrenaica	106	70	36
Intendenza Tripolitania	450	300	150
12 th auto-grouping of C.S.F.A.A.S.	535	391	144
Totals	1,536	911	525

By pointing out that the trucks ceded by various agencies to own means or engaging in fixed services garrison were definitely less than 911 mentioned, due to various inefficiencies and losses; and those available were just sufficient to ensure supplies and vacate to large units online and it seemed doubtful that could suffice for the eviction of the Intendenza and escorts.

The divisions, then, were really badly reduced: the *Brescia* had 28 vehicles, the *Trento* had 40, the *Pavia* 30 and *Bologna* 20, in addition to the rates of reinforcement received from Intendenza Superiore (including known trucks in 911). The *Trieste* and *Ariete* were somewhat better off, although they had undergone significant of epic proportions, not yet specified. Many other units (especially labor companies) were totally devoid of means.

The other element was the assessment of the state of efficiency of the units, summarized in these figures:

Recon Grouping: medium at 30% of the organic, with two M 13 tanks and four light tanks. The *Giovani Fascisti* battalions was at 80%.

Ariete: the 132nd Tank was left with 20 M 13 tanks efficient

the 32nd Tank had lost all light tanks, the 8th bersaglieri was at 30% and 132nd artillery at 50%, lost almost all services.

Trieste: the 65th infantry regiment had a battalion at 80% and the other at 30%, the 66th infantry was at 70%, the 9th bersaglieri at 25%, the 21st artillery at 50%, services almost full.

Brescia: the 19th and 20th infantry were at 70%, the 1st fast artillery at 80%, Divisional units between 50 and 70%, services at 70%.

Bologna: the 39th and 40th infantry were at 30%, the 205th artillery had lost all guns, Divisional units at 50% and services at 20%.

Pavia: the 27th and 28th infantry were at 30%, the 3rd fast artillery reduced to one piece from 75/27, the 26th artillery at 70%, Divisional units at 50%, services 50%.

Trento: the 61st and 62nd infantry were at 15%, the 7th bersaglieri at 50%, the 46th artillery at 65%, Divisional units at 60% and services nearly at full strength.

Corps Support: IV squads group *Aosta* at 75%, the I/86th infantry *Sabratha* at 80%, the 16th Corp artillery grouping at 8%, and 24th at 35%, the 5th Army artillery group at 65%, and 8th at 75%, the 340^o border guard artillery group at 50%, the engineers at 80%.

The data were not very comforting. In practice, the only positive element was offered by that morale was still good, despite the high attrition. Seeing this, Cavallero turned to these:

“So much decided and energetic-had to write-I say so clearly my thinking. The withdrawal decision was reached for military needs; recriminations about the past should not be made at this time and I hope will never be made. If someone who works with us, has made mistakes and made it difficult for this collaboration, we have to put aside any bitterness. The movement decided to best be accomplished. From that moment on, I mean that everyone with sacrifice of oneself, to give everything because the movement succeed in the best way”.

On that occasion was also addressed in particular to Gambara: “*I know perfectly-he said-that your opinion disagrees with decisions taken by Gen. Rommel the folding*” and added, just to point out, that this view had been expressed "too many times". Then, at 10:00 went to Benghazi.

Ritchie had thought that Rommel would have led a maneuver delaying until the Dema-Mechili line. In this

hypothesis, Godwin-Austen was assigned as first objectives Lamluda (West of Derna) to the 4th Indian Division and the 7th Armored Division Mechili, while the 22nd Guards Brigade had to cross the desert further South to go with as quickly as possible on Benghazi. At the same time, the strength and the Gen. Reid had to begin the much delayed advanced from Gialo to Ajdabiya.

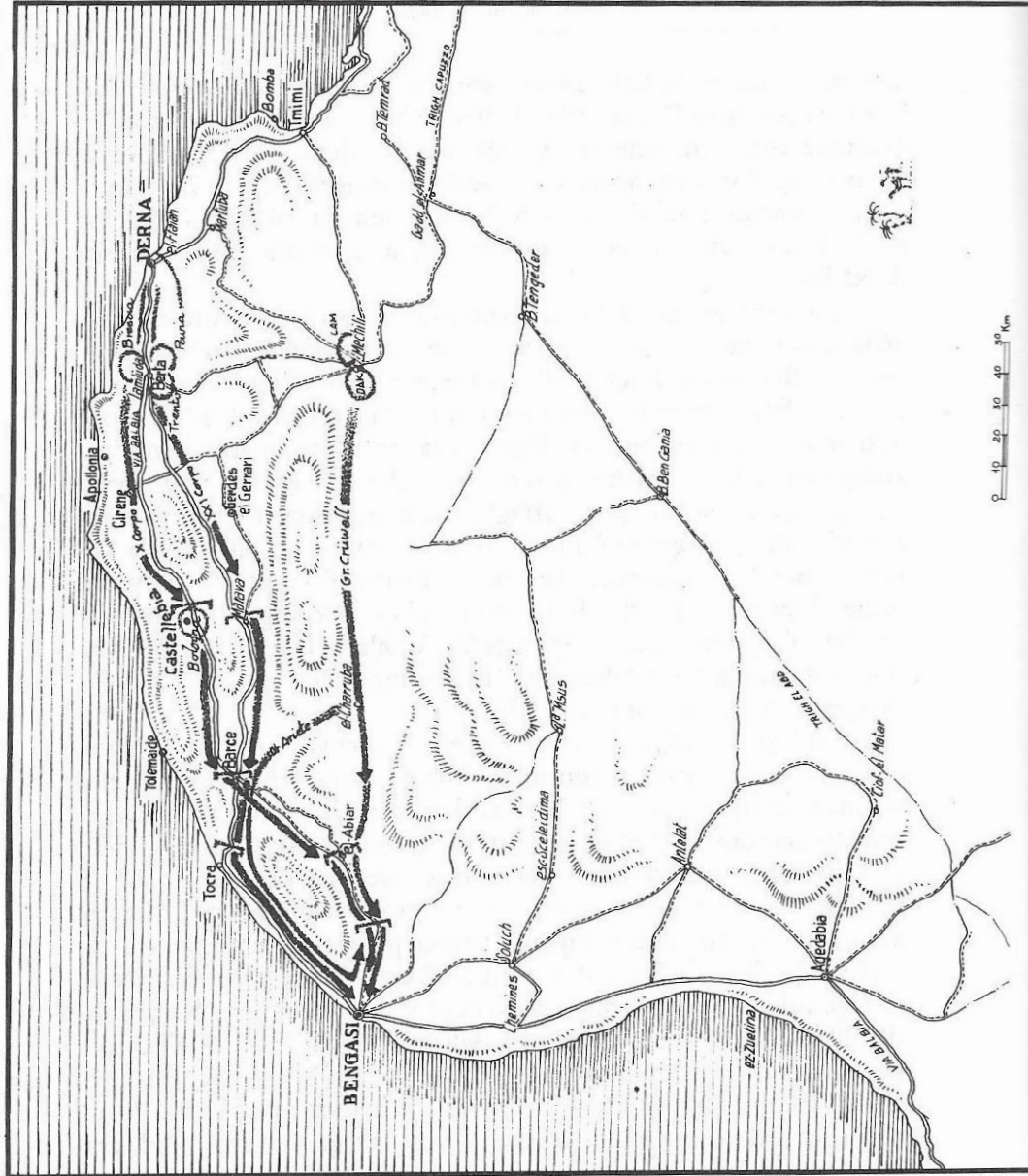
But the guards were not ready, primarily due to the non replacement of many vehicles which were damaged or worn-out, and Reid needed to complete the necessary supplies. On balance, when Rommel ordered the retreat, the British 13 Corps pretty much limited to push forward simple avant-garde. The 18th Ritchie realized that the opponent had no intention to give battle on the positions of Derna and Mechili; accordingly modified the initial directives. Nothing changed for the 4th Indian, but the 7th Armored Division was aimed at Benghazi and Guards had to aim at Bir Tengeder, then reach Antelat, sending a detachment to Msus-Ghemines. In essence: bag closing in Benghazi, with a doubling in the South.

Bearing in mind the foregoing, it is clear that the retreat of the German-Italian army continued on the 18th without many problems, aside from a Stuka bombardment on *Ariete* and *Trieste*, which caused 50 dead and as many wounded ⁽⁴⁸⁾. This gave a different atmosphere at 14 o'clock meeting in Benghazi. Rommel premise that aerial reconnaissance had not confirmed the dreaded wide-ranging wrapping, so before the evening had to have on the Berta the X and XXI Corps, except for the rear guard. For the next day was the continuation of rear guard to Berta and Crüwell stop the entire group South of the *gebel*, in contact with the enemy to protect the southern flank of Navarini. If the 7th Armored Division, whose direction was predictable, he instead bent northwards to trap the infantry in the *gebel*, Crüwell was attacked on the left flank (sketch No. 82). However it was necessary to hasten the eviction-already underway-of Intendenza on Misurata. Cavallero declared himself satisfied and proposed a new appointment at 21:30 in Benghazi.

The evening conversation took place between Cavallero, Bastico and Rommel because Kesselring was restrained on the airfields. The most important news provided by aerial reconnaissance was a

IL RIPIEGAMENTO DELLE FORZE ITALO-TEDESCHE SU BENGASI
(18-20 dicembre)

Schizzo n. 82



column of 50 tanks and about 400 vehicles identified in the Gerrari area, marching westward, in the guise of British left wing.

An advance on Benghazi worried all far less than a decisive boost toward Ajdabiya. Clarified the situation, was devised the final movement mechanism, having in the meantime given the chance to organize, through careful collection of vehicles, the organic flow of the various units in arrays and deadlines. For the whole day of the 19th the Crüwell Group ensured exposed flank of the XXI Corps, two divisions were to block the roads to Maraua (the *Brescia* North and *Pavia* South) to give time to the remaining forces of retreat; the *Trento* was barring at Regima the steps of *gebel* to cover Benghazi. Subsequently the two Armored Corps could also drain South of Benghazi, leaving behind some recon elements. Within two or three days, according to British pressure and the effectiveness of aerial actions of the axis, you can also retrieve the *Brescia* and *Pavia*, but in truth, Rommel hoped to take on the *gebel* over three days, because overall the movements had performed well.

As for the material, the examination carried out had led to calculate the eviction of most in time and were even adopted facings to load as much as possible on ships departing from Benghazi, after having evacuated the sick and wounded to hospital ships.

Cavallero and Rommel also discussed the possibility to defend Benghazi longer, but topographical features of the area, the absence of defensive organization sufficient radius to create a Tobruk type fortress and, however, the absolute unavailability of forces necessary for such an undertaking, led him to conclude that the city had to be held long enough for the evacuation of personnel and material. This time would have been guaranteed by the *Brescia* and *Pavia* divisions on Castellebia-Maraua positions, the enemy allowing it naturally.

On the morning of the 19th, in a final meeting in Benghazi, Kesselring reported that the British column spotted the previous day in the desert was about 50 miles southwest of Mechili and military leaders agreed on the improvement of the situation and presented concrete hope that the maneuver, already well underway, it would end in a more than satisfactory. Then Rommel, in response to a specific question of Cavallero, requested the

general features of the device that was intended to achieve in Ajdabiya. Given that the sector-by-sector would continue in the time granted by the enemy, the infantry divisions were deployed on a semicircular front of about forty kilometers to the North and East of Ajdabiya, with the Crüwell Group on right, Umm el-Chonfuss, somewhat backward position. Everything was going to come from Tripolitania would instead stopped alignment Marsa Al burayqah-Marada. It was also a coup de main on Gialo, to eliminate the base there made by the enemy. Cavallero shared the framework and at 10:00 departed with Kesselring from the Benina airport to return to Rome.

The Corps had completely unhooked, after blasting of mine on the blocks to the East and to the West of Derna, and the movement continued during the day using a laborious shuttle game with vehicles available. The first step had to be taken back to the base station Castellebia-Maraua. The X Corps, which was assigned the route Dar-Berta-Beda Littoria-Castellepia- Barce, namely via Balbia, left a rearguard at Bertha, a tactical group of the *Brescia* (formed by III/20th infantry and IV/1st fast artillery) and the Vaiarini grouping of *Bologna*, formed with the units recently received (the 1st Battalion carabinieri paratroopers, the instruction battalion of Barce and two companies of the 65th infantry). At dusk the *Bologna* was established at Castellebia, while *Brescia* crashed at Beda Littoria, some 40 kilometers further to the East. The XXI Corps, which folded on the Berta-Slonta-Maraua- Barce had been entrusted the task of the entire rearguard *Trento*, if engaged, deprive, withdraw fighting successive swings. But there was need. Already at the dawn of the 19th the *Trento* occupied the Maraua junction, the *Pavia* and artillery were in Borgo Torelli and the command at Barce and throughout the day there were no variations.

On the other hand, the 7th Indian Brigade, who that day had entered in Derna, had to be deprived of many means for advancing in the desert and the 5th Indian Brigade went forward with difficulty due to the poor state of the trails.

To the South the whole Crüwell group proceeded very slow for the mud that raged at Mechili-Charruba-el Abiar. The evening the *Afriakorps* reached el-Abiar, consoled by the good news that 22 Pzkw had arrived at Benghazi. The Army Corps of Maneuver, even slower to the characteristics of its facilities and for

the fact that suffer the inconveniences of marching into the queue, at 18:00 he stood for about thirty kilometers east of Charruba. Had always been after eight to ten kilometers away, on the left, from Campbell's support group, but this had not caused significant inconvenience.

Orders sent from the *Panzergruppe* at 20:00 provided a further rush back and especially the withdraw of the Crüwell group South of Benghazi. To this end, the X Corps dispose that *Brescia* replace before 9 o'clock in the morning, 20 December, following the *Bologna* on Castellebia positions and latter brought ASAP at Coefia, just over ten kilometers northeast of Benghazi. The retreat of rearguards, still at Berta, It would have been implemented gradually, maintaining constant contact with the opponent in order to hold him for as long as possible. Unfortunately on the night at 20:00 that communication came Vaiani grouping, busy throughout the day of the 19th, had been overwhelmed by 5th Indian Brigade and 42nd *Royal Tanks* losing almost all the carabinieri battalion and the *Barce* battalion. As part of XXI Corps, however, had to move to East to Benghazi, in el Abiar Scheme, to ensure the flow of security group Crüwell, and the *Trento* remain in Maraua. So on 20 December the *Pavia* will dispose with a part at el-Abiar, crossing out directions from East and South, and the remaining at Regima the Front to the East. The Comando Superiore left at Tobra, where he was transferred on the 18th, to go to Sirte:

To the South, the movement of the CAM resumed at 07:00. If the width of the track significantly reduced the depth of the column, the continuous rain and the passage of tracked vehicles had made it extremely difficult soil conditions. The command of the Corps proceeded with the first echelon of the *Trieste*. In march, was not in the Act! Radio link with the *Ariete*, so when at 14:00, through a liaison officer, Crüwell signaled Piazzoni leaving the *Ariete* northeast of Charruba, as a rearguard for the entire group and protection on this and Gioda Navarini order was relayed to Balotta official means. At 16:30 the column of the *Trieste*, temporary break in was attacked by a squadron of *King's Dragoon Guards*. Rejecting the raid and resumed movement at 17:00, under the rain, a return of some armored means surprises some trucks of the tail, capturing a company of infantry regiment II/65th. At 21:00 the Division reached el-Abiar and supported to

outskirts of town, opposite to the Southeast and East. Fuel and food were finished; the men exhausted.

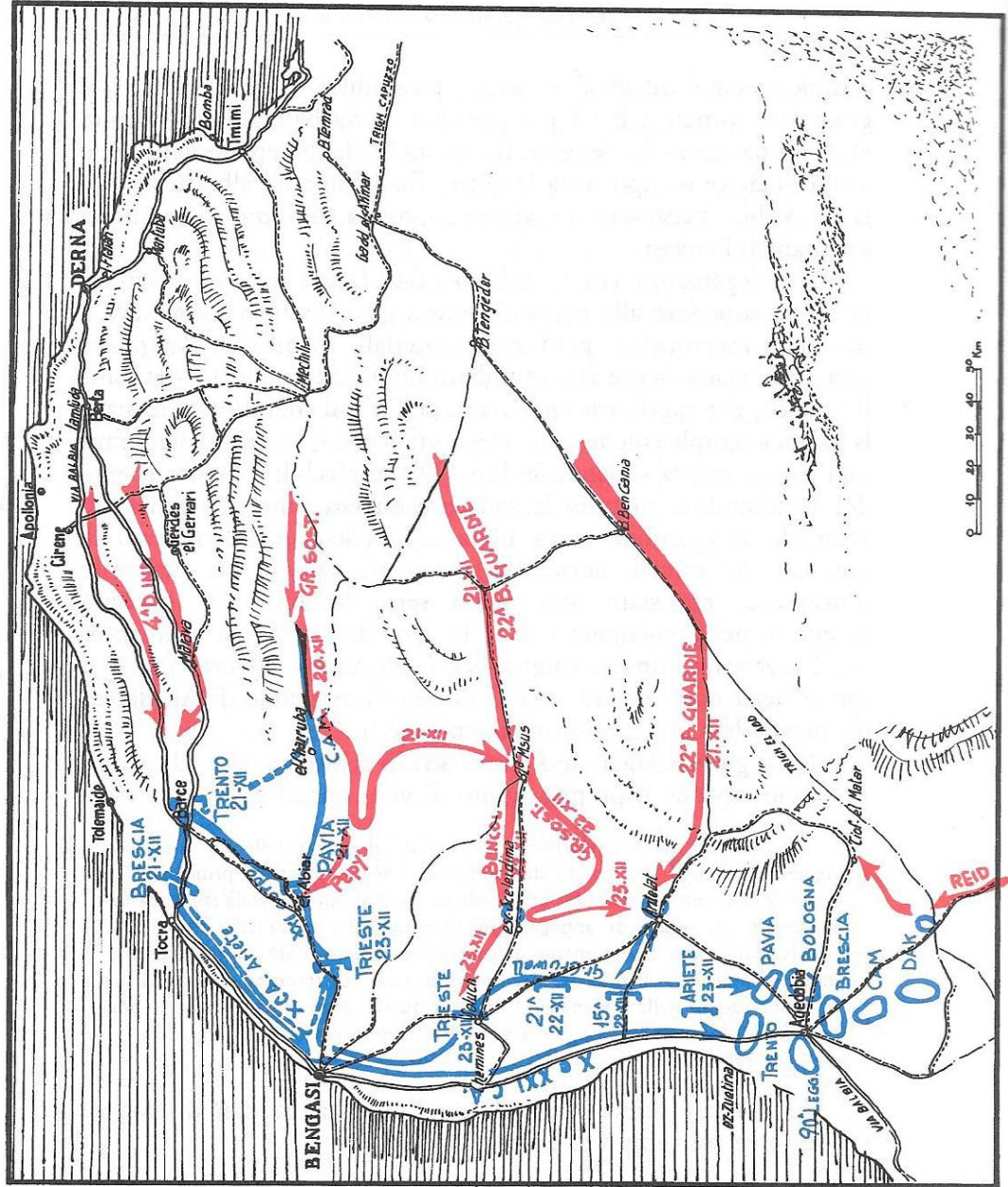
Meanwhile, at 19:30, obtained the radio link with the *Ariete*, Piazzoni had come to know the unexpected forced stopover lasted for the entire day. From 08:00 hit by artillery fire from the South and accepted the engagement, the Division had deployed the 8th bersaglieri, 132nd tank while trying to solve the issue with maneuver. Only at 18:00 could the march be revived, however, by failing Balotta received the order to stop before Charruba arrived in that town preferred to abandon the Trigh and take the trail for Nahiba- Barce. The decision soon proved unhappy due to road surface: the media had in slime up to the hubs, the recovery was long and painful, other trucks were abandoned and they other weapons and ammunition. Furthermore, the inability to take radio prevented Piazzoni to stop the *Ariete* at Nahiba. Crüwell, informed of the incident, established then that for the moment the *Trieste* tried to eliminate the enemy infiltration and that on the next day the *Afrikakorps* and the *Trieste* you become leaders to Ajdabiya, keeping East of the via Balbia, along the route Regima - Suluq-Beda Fomm. The *Ariete* had to move on and stop on the Trigh West of Charruba as rearguard, later changed in the employment order to defend el-Abiar, in place of the *Pavia*.

On 21 December movements took place as expected (sketch No. 83). At noon, the XXI Corps had withdrawn the *Trento* on the edge of the beam of the Barce via Balbia and the road to el-Abiar, and remained with the *Pavia* at Regima el-Abiar pending the return of the *Ariete*. The X Corps, in turn, withdrew the *Brescia* on a ridge at Tocrá and sent the *Bologna* to Ajdabiya. On the other hand, the CAM was once troubled day. At 08:50 Piazzoni ordered *Trieste* to Ajdabiya, but this was immobilized: the fuel was exhausted and supply columns sent to Benghazi had not indented (and not return the following afternoon). Failure to supply not only blocked the *Trieste*, but prevented the return of the *Pavia*. Meanwhile Piazzoni, invested by own car, leaving the interim command to Azzi, Commander of the *Trieste* ⁽⁴⁹⁾.

While the *AfrikaKorps* moved towards Beda Fomm, *Ariete* -which lacked any news came at midday in view of Barce and folded toward the Southwest on track for el-Abiar. Soon, unfortunately, the column found itself imprisoned in a quagmire almost

IL RIPIEGAMENTO DELLE FORZE ITALO-TEDESCHE SU AGEDABIA
(21-24 dicembre)

Schizzo n. 83



completely flooded and with no chance of progressing. He was clearly going back to Barce to take the via Balbia and reach el-Abiar from Benghazi. The only escape from the quagmire of the area south of Barce worked all night, finally at dawn was touched the via Balbia. Towards evening the Division, exhausted, stopped at the eastern suburbs of Benghazi.

The folding, that reality was hurried so appear greater than the need, had already caused and continues to cause huge material losses, while from Benghazi was busily in warehouse-clearance schemes. The enemy, which almost everywhere had lost contact, simply retreat disturbed with light elements; most seemed had not yet passed the Derna-Mechili line even on the evening of December 21. Throughout the pre-*gebelica* area, until parallel of Msus, the Italian and German aerial reconnaissance had detected the presence of small mechanized nuclei; some of, greater consistency, had been identified towards Mechili, others had reached on the afternoon of the 21st the area of Cyrene. On the other hand, for the opponent, a patrol of the *Long Range Desert Group* went into the night on the 22nd to the airfield of Ajdabiya, demolishing fifteen aircraft.

That day Auchinleck had written to Ritchie and Churchill. At first expressed his operationally:

“(…) If the enemy were to concentrate the bulk of his forces at Ajdabiya, I think this would be your main goal. It is possible that attempts to stop at Ajdabiya, probably hoping to retain a foothold in Cyrenaica, but almost certainly to delay our pursuit and attain the ability to go further back, to Sirte (...). If you decide to try to stop remain at Ajdabiya, might fall into our hands if (and I know how big this if is) we could continue to push forward an appropriate entity to (...)” ⁽⁵⁰⁾.

The *Premier* held to signify the importance of the influx of new forces on the battlefield:

“(…) The 2nd Armored Brigade is set to *Acrobat* [advanced in Tripolitania] but is at your fingertips, in the reserve of the 8th Army, to the possible need to install it first. The 22nd Armored Brigade of the 1st Armored Division is now replaced, in pursuit, the 4th Armored Brigade of the 7th Armored Division and moving mixed columns to Mechili Benghazi and Antelat (...)” ⁽⁵¹⁾,

and he added that, it seemed, 15,000 Germans were

collected in Ajdabiya, while the Italians were still North of Benghazi. According to unconfirmed reports, the German units would remain at Maraua.

On 22 December, at 09:00, the ordered *Panzergruppe* packing on Benghazi to rearguard Division, *Brescia* and *Trento*, to protect the evacuation of the city. Rommel was following closely the developments of the situation and rightly regulated also on news that poured on the opponent; especially was interested in the 7th Armored Division. That day knew that the threat was pursuing to the Southeast.

Actually the Gen. Gott had decided to abandon attempts to bottle up in Benghazi forces flow again from the *jebel*, and ordered, therefore, the support group to bend towards the South with most of his divisions advancing on Msus. Toward Benina should continue just a little column called Pepys. Moreover, Ritchie had realized that Gen. Reid, departed from the Gialo at 20:00 and passed the Wadi Faregh at 21:00, would not be able alone to conclude something at Ajdabiya. So had placed that the 22nd Guards Brigade⁽⁵²⁾, now at 20:00 at Tengeder, pass under the orders of Godwin-Austen and steered with a column on Msus (II *Scots Guards* and a squadron of the 11th Hussars), with a second even more toward the Southwest on Antelat (the III *Coldstream Guards*, with a squadron of 2nd and one of the 11th Hussars). So on December 22 were made aimed at Antelat and Sceleidima, held by small German garrisons, and also at pre-desert of Saunnu (thirty kilometers southwest of Antelat). Of course, the advance was effectively endorsed by the *Western Desert Air Force*, which could benefit from the 20th the airfield of Mechili.

The reporting of these movements prompted Rommel to hasten the retreat to Agedabia, where the 90th Light, now controlled by Gen. Veith, was already deployed. The *Pavia*, replaced finally by the *Trieste*, units began to move towards the 10 o'clock in the morning and late afternoon arrived at their destination, reached a few hours later by the *Trento*, which a subsequent order did continue beyond Benghazi. Instead the *Trieste* received fuel supplies and food only in the afternoon; his columns began moving from el-Abiar at 21:00, but the 66th infantry, who still had all means mired, didn't budge in the middle of the night. The march was laborious and introduced truly dramatic moments for the mud that upset the track and

the impossibility to proceed off the road. The presence of elements of the *Pavia* and Germans spent as well as the length of the extension, meant that at midnight the head (9th bersaglieri) had made few kilometres and the tail was still strong in el-Abiar. At the dawn of the 23rd the first units of the Division arrived at Benina and Azzi ceded the interim command of CAM to Balotta.

In addition to the attitude of the enemy, Rommel also noted the troops. The armor had a potential expressed by efficient tanks available at the time, but those of the infantry suffered other types of wear, in certain respects much heavier. And he was beginning to have doubts about the strength of the remaining Italian divisions. That is why morning sent a letter to von Rintelen for the Comando Supremo and, for information, to Bastico. As usual the form left something to be desired:

“Please want to communicate-wrote-the following General Cavallero for il Duce:

1) Combative capacity of Italian troops during 5 weeks of uninterrupted serious fighting and filled with losses, although tactically favorable, he suffered so that the Italian units are no longer needed for defense against an enemy attack on the necessarily vast watershed of Ajdabiya. In recent days I have noted worrisome problems at units of Italian troops to me personally known as particularly good, problems that would have to be attributed, as well as the General tiredness and fatigue, among other things, to very strong enemy air superiority. Given the persistence of the problem critical fuel situation most of the German and Italian Air Arm, there is the possibility of a more effective response.

Therefore I would run the risk of exposing the troops to annihilation on the position of non-Ajdabiya operationally support. Why can no longer perform the duties of the Duce to defend to the extreme Tripolitania. I as a result, forced to fight only with the temporizing action on the Ajdabiya positions and to withdraw the bulk of the troops essentially more favorable positions operationally South of Arco dei Fileni.

2) A chance to untie overland Italian and German troops that are fortified front of Bardia- Sollum -Halfaya and Cirener does not exist in any foreseeable time limits. Similarly, it is impossible to vacate these troops with Italian warships, according to the conception of the Comando Supremo. Therefore these troops remain completely abandoned to themselves. Until they can repel enemy attacks depends not only on current supplies, but also by increasingly limited defense capabilities of the fortifications. I therefore ordered the generals Schmitt and De Giorgis to continue the heroic resistance of them too much and I did present the great importance of this task. At the same time I left the two generals, however, freedom of action and authorized them, if they

consider helpful further resistance, to surrender their weapons to honorable conditions, after they had run out of ammunition and food reserves. I felt it my duty to do so because, in my opinion, we cannot assume responsibility for the needless sacrifice of about 15,000 soldiers Italians and Germans ⁽⁵³⁾.

Bastico was caught by surprise, but basically agree. Sent Leut. Col. Heggenreiner, connecting to the *Panzergruppe* to get some clarification, then proceeded to turn any comment line to Cavallero: not caught the low residual performance of Italian units, especially dismounted infantry because it is in fact granted departing; neither seemed to be of great importance to the decision to defend Tripolitania not the Ajdabiya area but at the Ara dei Fileni because once abandoned the *gebel*, one was the other under the topographic profile-operating. No objection, therefore, about the position chosen for the permanent cessation of Jesi: Ara-brackish Lakes area ⁽⁵⁴⁾. In response to Cavallero the Comando Superiore was visited by Leut. Col. Montezemolo on 24 December ⁽⁵⁵⁾. Mussolini agreed with the proposals of Rommel of simply delaying action around Ajdabiya for the time necessary to achieve the all-out defence East of el Agheila, constituting attractiveness with a strong foothold in Marada Yes to prevent any attempt at circumvention. Full agreement even on the front of Bardia- Sollum -Halfaya. However, Mussolini wanted “*improve principas defensive capabilities as much as possible of the works, aware that they will try by all means to assure regular supplies*” ⁽⁵⁶⁾. This sentence is extremely questionable in terms of military order, psychology and trust. Defenders of the border had already shown dared to fight bravely and intelligently without need of inducements, they knew that no one could be better and that mention of *regular supplies* after the retreat to Agedabia, when they were a month ago, amounted to suggest illusory hopes. Much clearer, and the military order of Rommel.

At noon on 23 December, the situation was as follows. The via Balbia was clogged by Italian and German units still discharge. The *Trieste*, locked to the southern suburbs of Bengzi, was to continue. The *Ariete*, take off before the *Trieste*, proceeded along the Balbia. The *AfrikaKorps* was deployed with the 15th *Panzer* at Beda Fomm and 21st North-East, facing East. The arrival of the 22nd Guards Brigade did not escape the German, recon elements and when the column of the III *Coldstream Guards*

arrived near Beda Fomm was attacked by a tactical group of the 15th *Panzer* and rejected in disarray over Antelat, along with the 3rd *Royal Tanks* come to his aid. The German tactician retired only later, when he appeared on the scene the group support of Campbell.

At 14:00 he received new orders Balotta from Crüwell: the *Trieste* with the German 3rd Recon Bn should attack the enemy units reported in Suluq, to prevent them from cutting to Ghemines the way of retreat; the *Ariete* had to instead move quickly northeast of Zuetina, keeping to the right of the *Afrikakorps*. So Azzi, who had met all its units – minus the 66th infantry, commissioned to settle at Ghemines to protect the via Balbia, against backgrounds from Benghazi-headed East, arriving at about 22:00 at four kilometers from Suluq without making contact with the enemy and having a system of strong-points waiting for the new day. However, at 02:00 came from *Afrikakorps* a message that ceased the attack and prescribed that the *Trieste* remain where it was “*until the last Italian soldier is passed by the origins of Benghazi.*”

The news on the opponent was uncertain, at least to some extent: it seemed that he had substantial forces concentrated around Suluq and arrived new units. In fact, the 22nd Guards Brigade-also called *Bencol* -awaited reinforcements by the 12th Lancers with armored cars and 3rd *Royal Tanks* (with six *Stuart* remaining), while the 7th Armored Division was receiving the replacement by the 1st Armored Division, whose 22nd Armored brigade (80 *cruisers* and 33 *Stuart*) had entered online at Mechili ⁽⁵⁷⁾.

Ritchie was a complete optimist. The previous day had written to Auchlnleck: “*the main task in my opinion remains the same: destroy all German forces before they can escape to Tripolitania (...) and, despite having mentioned the considerable difficulties caused by elongation of evacuation and supply lines, not dramatized because the 20 day developments had demonstrated that "the enemy has retreated from Mechili in great disorder and that he left a lot of material, much equipment and that the 7th Armored Division captured many prisoners, we cannot just be annoyed by him now," and then concluded: "so today it is another decisive day; decisive because will lead to the complete destruction of the Germans.*

or I will indicate that they have failed once more to have the cage. I pray that this doesn't happen again (...)"⁽⁵⁸⁾.

On 23 December Godwin-Austen called tasks. The support group was to clarify the situation between Benghazi and Antelat; The 22nd Guards Brigade to occupy Ajdabiya; the 22nd Armored brigade wrap the Italian-German eastern flank and realizing the encirclement; the Force E of Reid cut the via Balbia as a. South of Agedabia. But the result of these provisions was virtually nil.

At 08:45 of 24 December the *Pepys* column tested the positions of *Trieste*, which had 9th bersaglieri with II/21st artillery north of the track for Soluch and the II/65th infantry with artillery I/21st South, but was rejected. The *Trieste* spent much of the day watching British columns descend southward and disturbed with artillery fire. At 14:30 came the Corps of Maneuver ordered to retreat South of Agedabia and at 16:00 the Division began moving, not caught by the support group.

When, at 13:00, the 1st *King's Dragoon Guards* entered the city of Benghazi found the conditions very bad. The heavy shelling of the *Western Desert Air Force*, carried out with special care since December 17, and the destruction wrought by the Italian engineers before the evacuation, not allowed nor the immediate utilization of the port, full of shipwrecks, nor the ability to tap into warehouses of Intendenza, drained and burned.

The 22nd Guards Brigade of Gen. Marriott made a few kilometers towards Agedabia, then stopped; the 22nd Armored Brigade of Gen. Scott-Cockburn arrived at Saunnu, prevailed over the German company defending that place and ran out of fuel for 24 hours; the strength and limited itself to send a patrol at Bir el-Fenscia, East of Ajdabiya. Ultimately, by midnight the *Brescia* and the whole CAM were over the lines of Ajdabiya.

On December 25 was the date of adjustment for the whole *Panzergruppe*. The XXI Corps were deployed across the front with the *Trento* to the North towards the coast and the *Pavia* straddles the Balbia against origin of Antelat; The X Corps was placed facing East, with *Bologna* at the barrier of provenances from Saunnu and from Giof el-Matar and *Brescia* against water ingress from the Southeast. The divisions, whose average force did not reach the 4,000 men, had implanted a

series of strong points of reinforced company especially with anti-tank weapons. The 90th Light had collected southwest of Ajdabiya as Corps reserve. The CAM was in the area of Rugbet el-Hagina (about 25 kilometers south of Agedabia) and even further South, between el-Gtafia and el-Haseiat, the *Wadi el-Faregh*, was placed the *Afrikakorps* (sketch # 84).

At 09:45 Rommel held a meeting near the command of XXI Corps, with Navarirti, Gloria and Nicolini (Commander of the artillery corps). First, he reiterated the importance to complete at the earliest sides of artillery and the reinforcement of a number of pieces from 88 and 20 in anti-tank role. Then announced its intention to give battle at Ajdabiya, stopping the enemy with the Corps of infantry and armored with counterattack. In fact, loomed a certain calm. In the afternoon the British advanced elements took over and immediately made some probes on the fronts of the *Bologna* and *Pavia*, but was reduced to small raids and some brief intervention of artillery was sufficient to dismiss the exploring units. According to the *Panzergruppe* masses of armored forces between Msus and Antelat was still the bulk of the 7th Armored Division, so the evening warned to provide a strong boost to the offensive line astride of the via Balbia.

But Godwin-Austen wanted to get a clear idea about the mire of Rommel and in fact if he made the next day. He was convinced, in other words, that his antagonist was designed to hold in place until it had been dealt with in force. Because it was easy to infer that the Axis troops were supposed to have been a very strong wear, with a determined ' in depth ' perhaps *Crusader* could be concluded with a flourish. Therefore ordered the 22nd Guards Brigade attack that night on the sector of the XXI Corps and 22nd Armored came into contention the next morning, operating on the right flank of the defenses of Ajdabiya in search of the *Afrikakorps*, whose location was not known. In anticipation of the result, the Reuter news agency reported from Cairo:

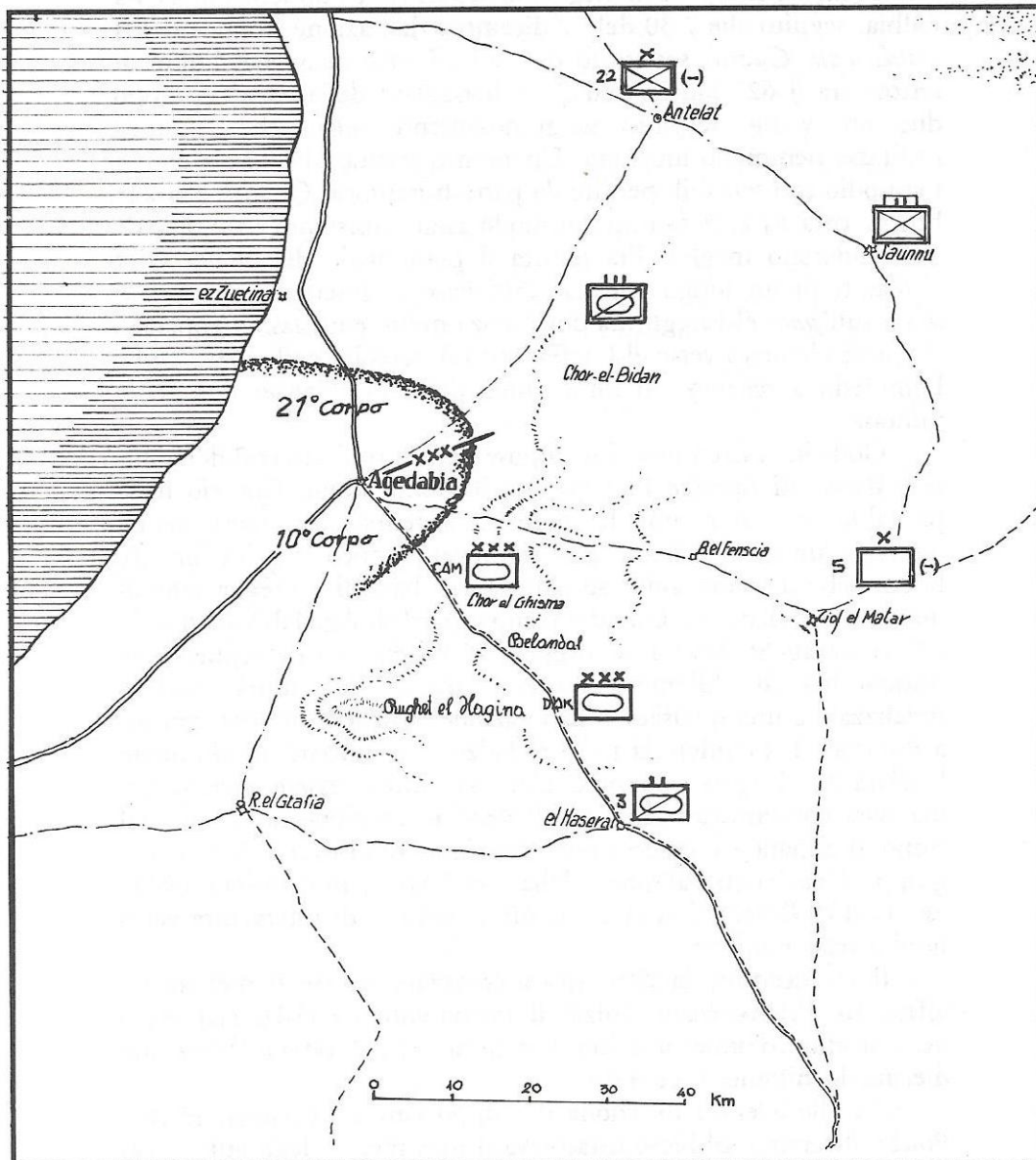
"The remnants of the *Afrikakorps* and Italian army are fleeing along the Sirte, on the road to Tripoli. The main objective, the annihilation of enemy forces in the Western desert, was achieved by the 8th Army. German armored forces were destroyed and only a handful of tanks which, in a panic, looking out towards Tripoli."

Marriott's Brigade was too dispersed, so not only was it impossible to attack in the night, but it

The deployment of Panzergruppe at Ajdabiya (31 December).

LO SCHIERAMENTO DEL PANZERGRUPPE AD AGEDABIA
(31 dicembre)

Schizzo n. 84



reduced to a long cannonade at the via Balbia, followed at 07:30 on December 27 by the front of the II *Coldstream Guards* supported by tanks. The one recorded in the sector boundary between 62nd infantry and 7th bersaglieri of *Trento* and after two hours was bloody rejected without line is not affected. A ready local mind closed the episode with the sensitive British losses. As for the 22nd Armored brigade, reconstituted in a very consistent ⁽⁵⁹⁾, things went better. It was game on the afternoon of the 26th from Giof el-Matar, in a long journey through the desert, towards el-Haseiat, the *Wadi el-Faregh*, where without much apparent enthusiasm spurred elements towards el-Gtafia, an area of the *Afrikakorps*. The immediate reaction of an part of the 15th *Panzer* dismissed the episode.

Godwin-Austen is not breaking up for a result so disappointing and decided to repeat the next day. That it was likely it was granted by the German-Italian, however was observed a particular high tactical significance. The two British brigades had acted on the direction and the starting bases of departure widely spaced. The Guards were North of Ajdabiya while the 22nd Armored stood West of el-Haseiat, the fifty kilometers between the two units made impractical any collaboration. Crüwell proposed, therefore, to Rommel to take the ball and begin to eliminate isolated 22nd Armored Brigade. The attack was to be led with concentric maneuver: from the 21st *Panzer* in North-South direction, from maneuvering Corps Northwest-Southeast, and Geissler (a part of the 15th *Panzer*) West-East. The 15th *Panzer* was held in intervening measure North or Northeast.

On 28 December the British 22nd Armored Brigade prepared to face the *Afrikakorps*. Started by el-Haseiat movement westward on two columns, one along the track to el-Gtafia and the other about ten kilometers further South.

But at 08:00 went into action the Crüwell Group (sketch No. 85). Since the sandy soil hindered the movement of vehicles and on the other hand being the relatively short distance, the CAM is articulated in three columns on foot: the *Ariete* with the score of efficient tanks and 8th bersaglieri was on the right in conjunction with the Geissler; the *Trieste* was the centre column (65th and 66th infantry) and the left (9th bersaglieri). The progression was

slow and at 14:30, after about 20 km, the CAM came into ballistic contact with the enemy, already struggling with the vise consists of two German branches. On the Axis side there were sixteen Pzkw II, 44 III Pzkw and IV and 20 M 13; from the British 54 *Crusader* and 35 *Stuart*. The clash lasted up to 17:00 ⁽⁶⁰⁾, when Scott-Cockburn was forced to escape to the South, beyond the *Wadi el-Faregh*, with the loss of 65 tanks (37 according to British sources), some 20 armored cars and 230 prisoners ⁽⁶¹⁾. The *Afrikakorps* acknowledged only seven tanks out of action. At 22:30 Crüwell ordered for the following day the divisions remained where they were, remaining on the battlefield, they obtained their supplies exploring elements go up to ten kilometers to the North-East and left vacates the area of el-Haseiat for the operation of aviation.

The day had been poor for the British 13th corps, which had begun well. A patrol, it appears with the connivance of the natives, had managed to infiltrate into the early morning hours in the airfield of Tamet destroying on the ground 11 Italian aircraft.

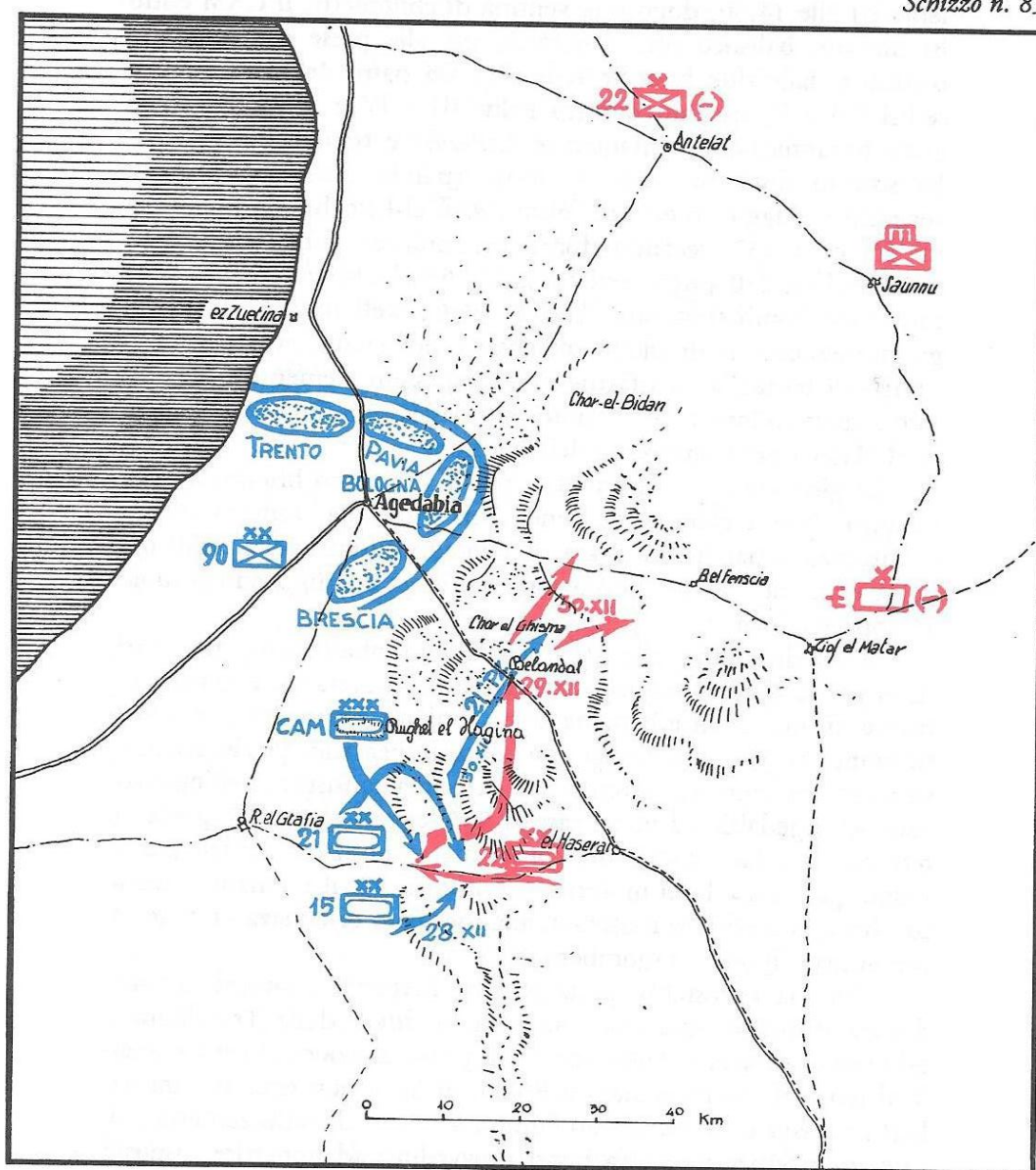
On December 28, at 10:00, while the tanks, combat was about to begin, Rommel had spoken with Navarini and Gioda. Stocks of ammunition and gasoline were limited, he said, and new supplies could reach only in January, so it was necessary to consider two alternatives. The first consisted in Ajdabiya evacuation and in this case, the 90th Light was placed in the rear. The second when storing current positions longer, then, motorized, banded retreat. For the moment, had concluded, there was no cause for alarm, though it was put in prior to displacement ⁽⁶²⁾.

About the rear position of el Agheila, where it would stiffen all resistance for the defense of Tripolitania, there were however considerable cause for concern. As reported on Leut. Col. Montezemolo in Rome, the line was not yet well set out and nobody was waiting in the work of strengthening. The Comando Superiore had but done so to give provisions for reorganization and staff allocation, necessarily disoriented, did come to a collection center established at Homs; to the dissolution of some non divisional units (mixed battalions, units and training companies), assigning the elements to X and XXI Corps and

The fighting of Ajdabiya (28-30 December)

I COMBATTIMENTI DI AGEDABIA
(28-30 dicembre)

Schizzo n. 85



CAM⁽⁶³⁾. As for regional planning, the XX Corps continued to have their dependencies the fort of Tripoli and western Tripolitania; Instead it was loose command of Tripolitania and replaced by the command of Syrtica (Gen. Torriano), which included the area of Homs (Homs and Misurata) and the Sirtico sector (Sirte and en-Nofilia).

All this, though, was the position at el Agheila. Bastico so stressed by Cavallero, on 29 December sent Gambata to Rommel. As reported Gambara, after success in the previous day, Rommel had decided to keep the positions held. More precisely, he was oriented to stay on the Ajdabiya -el Haseiat line initially forming the right wing of the deployment with the *Afrikakorps* and CAM. As a result, received some reinforcements, would keep the line with the X and XXI Corps, armored Corps sliding for a wide operation radius. The retreat to el Agheila would be implemented only if and when imposed by the enemy. In such eventuality, Rommel planned to organize a northern zone, between the coast-Marsa el Brega -Maaten Giofer- Ara dei Fileni and of fortify and garrison, and a southern zone, corresponding to the oasis of Marada, which would have been simply manned. In the interval between the two areas would act by using the patrol and intervention of mobile units.

The withdrawal would take place along the via Balbia for the infantry divisions, through subsequent cut ahead, under the patronage of Gen. Crüwell, which would be maintained at right wing and maneuvered in retreat. In the northern zone, where already were dumped two battalions *Giovani Fascisti*, the *San Marco* battalion and a German Regiment, would be immediately initiated many units of the *Sabratha*⁽⁶⁴⁾, that would assume responsibility for the area and proceeded to work strengthening with workers battalions. In the oasis of Marada, already manned by a German company and an Italian company strengthened, Rommel did not intend to send more troops.

That day the enemy activity was not worthy of note. Radio interceptions also were to mean that British units were occupied to resume in hand so units, as well as an intense afternoon bombing were recorded only artillery and shoots at exploratory activities. In contact, was the 22nd Guards Brigade, though it seemed that the Polish Brigade was moved at Beda Fomm. The 7th Fusiliers Brigade

(= 7th support group) still seemed in Suluq, and the 22nd Armored was focused towards Giof el-Matar.

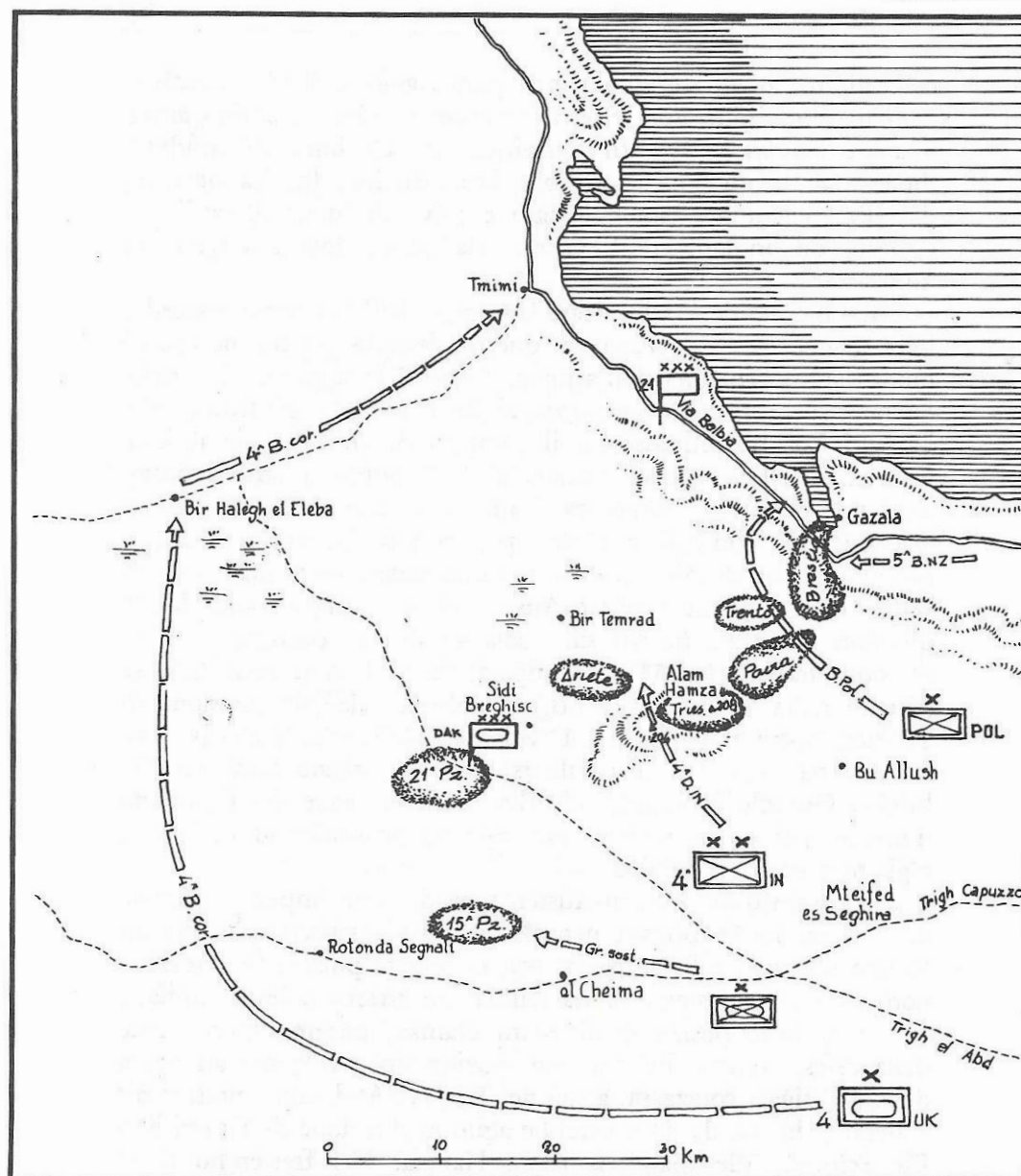
On the afternoon of the 29th the *Afrikakorps*, elements of which occupies el-Haseiat, he realized that in the area of Belandah enemy tanks and armored cars circulated. More and more in-depth reconnaissance they articulated that Scott-Cockburn had not withdrawn to Giof el-Matar, but was gathering forces at Belandah.

On 30 December, while CAM left for that location (10:00 hours), the 21st *Panzer* attacked the 22nd Armored shocked and incapacitated 50 armored cars or tanks (23 tanks of 62, according to a British source). In the evening the CAM and the *Afrikakorps* were located just to the East of Ajdabiya-el Haseiat; the first in the area of el-Ghisma Chor, the second between Belandah and el-Haseiat, with 3rd Recon Bn in this place (sketch No. 86).

In late afternoon, the Leut. Col. Montezemolo was received by Rommel, who asked his impression about the effective defense of Ajdabiya in the event of a serious enemy attack. Montezemolo had observed *de visu* the limits that have been placed to the combative capacity of infantry units and mechanized ones. He said it frankly to Rommel: each Division had more or less the strength of a regiment and was not physically able to hold a front of about fifteen kilometers on a flat terrain with no holds. Rommel agreed. Intended to give a few more arresting shots with the *Afrikakorps* in order to allow a bit of breath to the troops on foot, then folded the *Panzergruppe*. He saw the back line so organized: the *Sabratha* on the via Balbia Southeast of Marsa el-Brega; a corps South of es sebcha-Seghira, from Bir es-Suera at Maaten Giofer, facing Southeast and supported mostly at *Wadi el-Faregh*; Another Army Corps by Maaten Giofer (excluded) to about ten kilometres from Marada; the Corps of Maneuver in Marada; the *Afrikakorps* in reserve to the East of el Agheila, ready to counterattack. It was only a guideline, for the time being. Withdrawing it generated some doubts whether the shortage of vehicles that plagued X and XXI Corps, both for the existence of a single usable road, the via Balbia, or finally to the fuel shortage. Anyway had to do it out of contact with the enemy in four days.

Rommel believed they could stop enemy thrust East of Marsa Al burayqah-Marada if he managed to restore,

Schizzo n. 86



at least in part, the efficiency of the Italian divisions; to send those German the tanks and armored cars in coarse of transit from Germany, and to set up adequate stocks of ammunition, fuel and food before Godwin-Austen had organized their own attacks.

On 31 December there was ordered satisfaction at the *Panzergruppe*. There were 134 armored means out of action and thought that the enemy withdrew: the 13 Corp towards Mechili and the 22nd Armored Brigade, in ruins, Northeast, covering likely with rearguards left in place. Therefore as the possibility and opportunity to pursue large British units. At 11:30 Crüwell fore warned the divisions of the group to keep ready to move. Shortly after Rommel called the Gen. Francesco Zingales, just landed and intended to take command of the CAM. Taking into account the degree of Zingales, CAM passed to direct dependencies of the *Panzergruppe* and Gen. De Stefanis resumed command of the *Trento*. In relation to the hypothesis of a British withdrawal, the CAM had to take in the evening at the airfield of Ajdabiya where, at first light on 1 January, would be started towards Chor el-Bidan. Meanwhile the X and XXI Corps carried out an exploratory activity in their respective fields, while the 90th Light pushing the Mickl Group (155th infantry) to Bir Bu Feitah, on track for Antelat and the *Afrikakorps* sent elements of the 3rd and 33rd Recon Bns toward Antelat, Saunnu and Giof el-Matar. As you can see, the policy of Rommel was still uncertain, or subject to a certain orientation about the intentions of Godwin-Austen.

He was clearly disappointed. The two dry blows taking because Scott-Cockburn had persuaded that on the 22nd Armored Brigade could not count for more immediate fighting. He was forced to order the 7th Support Group of its scope and to await the arrival of reinforcements. The apparent lack of available troops in front of Ajdabiya made futile hope to conclude something. Moreover, his communications were so stretched that barely enough transportation for daily needs. Since it had not been possible to draw depots abandoned by Italians and Germans, the reopening of the ports of Derna and Benghazi became *conditio sine qua non* for improving logistic conditions.

On 1 January Rommel held two meetings. The first in a stronghold of the *Bologna*, at 09:00. Here summoned Zingales, who

was ordered to stop the *Ariete* already in march to Chor el-Bidan, awaiting the results of aerial reconnaissance. Just arrived, said that despite not having even a report, CAM could resume their advance and stay in measure to defend about 360°. The Mickl Group was placed on track for Antelat, the *Ariete* had to settle at Chor el-Bidan and *Trieste* about three kilometers further South. Tasks tended mainly to test the consistency of alleged enemy rearguards and to recognize the feasibility of the land respectively to the West, North and East.

Then Rommel went to Ajdabiya, where conferred with Navarini and Gioda. Soon began to take stock of the situation. The enemy, he said, had suffered heavy losses in the battle of 28-30 December, so much so that his units was not even capable of taking the last five trucks. It seemed that withdrew, though things could also change, in the sense that the arrival of reinforcements was more than possible and that if Bardia yielded other forces would be available for the front of Ajdabiya. So “*we have to fall back on a more backward and more economical: Marsa Al burayqah-Bir es Suera-Maaten-Belcleibat Giofer-track Maaten Marada*” and explained the deployment of Army Corps (the one mentioned at Leut. Col. Montezemolo), prescribing the use of very strong battalion's strongholds, with anti-tank and artillery pieces and protected by barbed-wire fences and mines. The interval between these strongholds had to be about two to three kilometers and surveillance of screen was entrusted to platoon in small towns. The *Afrikakorps* and the CAM's would protect the withdraw ⁽⁶⁵⁾.

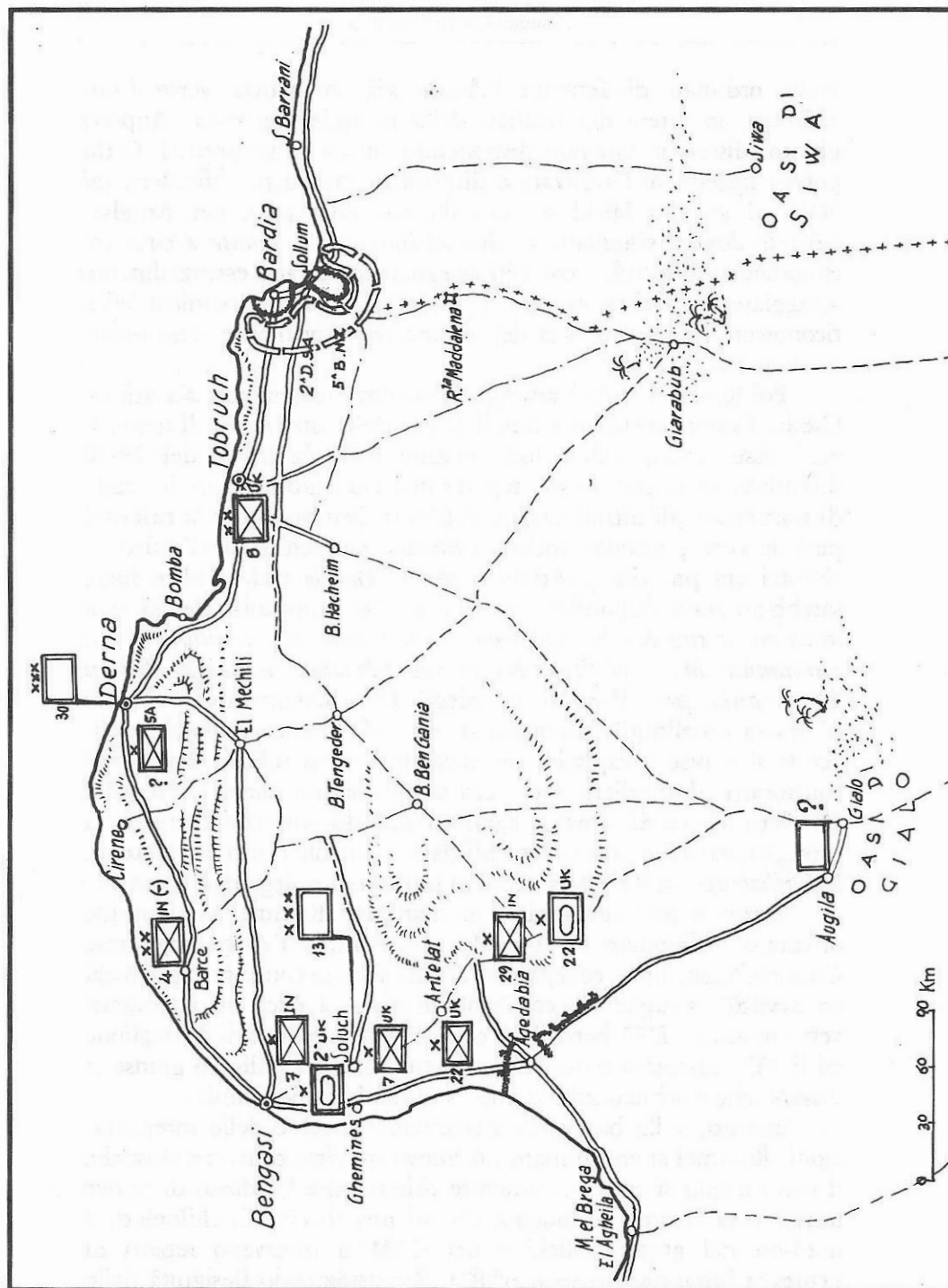
As you can see in the morning Rommel was so focused on getting to Ajdabiya. At 12:30 the *Ariete* reached, Chor el-Bidan, connecting sockets on the left with the Mickl Group and mechanized enemy patrols spotted about three kilometers to the Northeast. The 8th bersaglieri formed two cornerstones of battalion and 132nd Tank were held back, on the left. At 16:00 arrived the *Trieste*, which took on the right, in accordance with the provisions.

Meanwhile, on the basis of aerial reconnaissance and eavesdropping, Rommel had formed a new framework, deciding that the enemy had retreated further, that the influx of new units had really place and about ten kilometers northeast of the Mickl Group and CAM were British security units (sketch n° 87). Reconsidering the weak forces, armament failure, the limited possibility

The alleged British deployment in January 1942

IL PRESUNTO SCHIERAMENTO BRITANNICO AL 1° GENNAIO 1942

Schizzo n. 87



of aviation employment (due to the location of usable airports), the existence of a single way of retreat, abruptly decided to kick off the withdrawal, taking advantage of the high probability of not being hooked up again for a few days. As a result, the *Brescia*-whose command he had been taken by Gen. Lombardi, replacing Gen. Zambon, repatriated-that same evening to begin the motion on vehicles to Sackey, towards Maaten Giofer. The two armored Corps was committed to protect the operation.

3. THE RETREAT TO MARSA EL-BREGA AND THE FALL OF BARDIA-HALFAYA (2-17 JANUARY 1942).

The further withdrawal of the entire *Panzergruppe* was undisturbed. By 2 January, the *Brescia* was deployed at Maaten Giofer, with its four battalions in line, firmly supported at *Wadi el-Faregh*; at the same time it placed between the Sabratha Marsa el-Brega and sebcha es-Seghira to seal the via Balbia with units available. Then it was the turn of the XXI Corps. At 17:15 the *Trieste*, the *Ariete* and the Mickl Group received order to return to Ajdabiya. The two Italian divisions had to move to the back of the XXI Corps to give the change to larger units, and allow their release. At noon Rommel himself came under the command of the Corps to clarify how the constitution of the new battalion's position. The evening began moving the *Trento*, whose field was taken at 06:00 of January 3 by the *Trieste*. Twelve hours later also *Pavia* receded, replaced the *Ariete*, while the sector's responsibility passed entirely to the CAM⁽⁶⁶⁾.

On 4 January the two Corps of Navarini and Gioda were nearing settlement. The *Trento* to the South of sebcha es-Seghira, Bir es Suera; the *Pavia* on *Wadi el-Belcleibat* in Faregh Maaten; the *Brescia* at Maaten Giofer and *Bologna* at Alam el-Mgaad, on track for Marada. The command of X Corps was placed West of Maaten Giofer and XXI at the Sidi Hmuda marabuto, roughly halfway between el Agheila and Marsa el-Brega. The only difficulties were derived from the poor condition of the tracks, by the *ghibli* of silts, around 30 of them remained immobilized. On the front of Ajdabiya they stayed through the *Trieste* via Balbia, the *Ariete* on the slopes to Beda Fomm and Antelat

the 90th Light and on those for Saunnu and Giof el-Matar. The *Afrikakorps* was astride the Ajdabiya-el Haseiat track.

On 5 January Rommel sent the order of withdrawal of the armored corps. At 19:00 the *Trieste*, first, left the positions; to the last 24 units of the *Ariete* came from Ajdabiya. Remained in the queue the Mickl group, instructed to oppose subsequent resistance if too closely shadowed by opposing columns. Having it fast item shortages, received a reinforcement group temporary Italian tactician, consisting of a company bersaglieri, a tank company with eight M 13, a 20 and a flying piece of 65. The first step was made in Middle Mulah en Nojra, halfway between Ajdabiya and Marsa el-Brega where the CAM he remained until the 8th, when the *Panzergruppe* that the *Ariete* saw on Wadi el-Faregh, between the *Pavia* and the *Brescia*, occupying with a reinforced bersaglieri platoon Bir el-Ginn, in front of the *sebcha* es-Seghira.

On 9 January, around 10:00, Balotta told of the arrival at their destination and 14:00 Rommel ordered the *Trieste* began at dusk, in turn, the retreat to rejoin the *Ariete* on Wadi el-Faregh, and the *Afrikakorps* is brought to the East of el Agheila. By 10 January the new device of the *Panzergruppe* was in place (diagram no. 88). There was still over the lines the Mickl Group that folded in the early hours of 13 January. Rommel was satisfied and was pleased with the Corps commanders. Now it was rearranging the divisions with new incoming units and to restore equipment and avoid a possible surprise by Godwin-Austen.

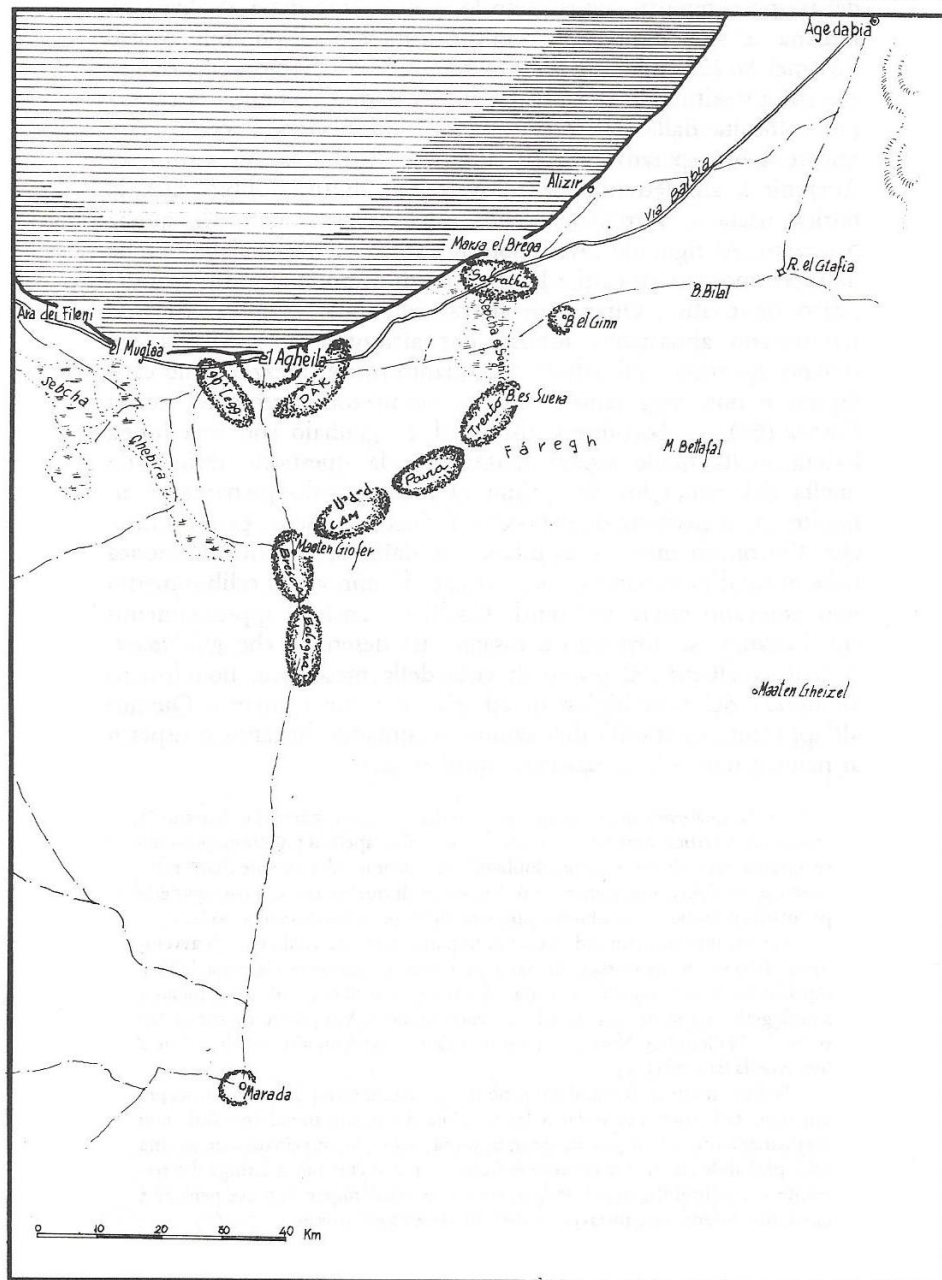
The Command of the British 13 Corp, reports of a traffic provided by patrols and aerial recon led to think about the possibility of a German-Italian folding. The poor weather conditions and a sandstorm, which raged throughout the day on 6 January, did not consider that Rommel could take advantage of it. So it came to pass that the January 7 some patrols gave the unexpected announcement of the evacuation of Ajdabiya. As soon as the suspicions became certainty, terrestrial reconnaissance went decisively towards the South and within a week had identified the position of Marsa el-Brega.

However the advance into Western Cyrenaica had inevitably created a series of logistical difficulties and serious shortcomings in the sector

The deployment of Panzerguppe at Marsa el-Brega (6 January 1942)

LO SCHIERAMENTO DEL PANZERGRUPPE A MARSALA EL BREGA
(6 gennaio 1942)

Schizzo n. 88



terrestrial transport prevented moving the 4th Indian Division South of Benghazi, so were available against Rommel the 22nd Guards Brigade and the 1st Armored Division, who was replacing the 7th Armored. Apart from that, he weighed the bad evidence provided by the 22nd Armored Brigade which had been fed so many hopes. On 30 December Ritchie had written to Auchinleck admitting to cultivate more of a doubt about the tactics used and the use of the units, especially those armor. In that regard, he highlighted the inferiority of the guns mounted on tanks and the need to have as soon as possible of the piece from 6 lbs.. As for armored vehicles-the *cruisers* does not seem robust enough to deal with the difficulties of the desert terrain and *Stuart*, as far as good means, were light tanks and bore no comparison, in combat, with the *Panzer*⁽⁶⁷⁾-Auchinleck replied on January 1 with a long letter, which clearly separated from the technique issue of command. On the first point agreed fully on the superiority of the German fire, but believed that the inconvenience is balanced by British superiority; on the other hand the *Panzer* with medium-caliber cannon could not be many. Shared appreciation that the *cruisers* were uncomfortable in the wilderness, and that *Stuart*, though excellent in terms of mechanics, were not at the level of English or German tanks in combat. As for the apparent inferiority of British command than the enemy did not want to make judgments, though:

“I have the unwanted sensation-he wrote-that the Germans beat us in cunning and tactics, as well as in speed, and I must know ASAP if this is true. If that is the case, then we must seek new leaders immediately. No consideration or possession of personal qualities like courage and popularity can be cited as sufficient to keep the place (...).

For now, I'm not criticizing anyone in particular, but I think the events of last week requiring an extensive explanation about the cause of the inability of the 22nd Armored Brigade to face the enemy and even less to defeat him, and I hope that you are able to give those answers. You can instruct whom you want-Willoughby Norrie or Messervy or Gott or anyone else-to get to the bottom in the affair (...).

If your current commanders are too old or too inflexible to learn by experience or by the Germans then we must take another, not necessarily in the Armored Corps; Verily, in these circumstances, it seems unlikely that you are in that Corp, unless it draws to directly to the younger ranks. It may be that I'm denigrating good people and it is not my intention, but a remedy must be found (...)⁽⁶⁸⁾.

To the point where they were reached things objectively, is not that Godwin-Austen was able to accomplish a lot. The 22nd Armored Brigade had to be withdrawn from the battlefield; the three armored regiments had lost many means, because out of action or mechanical failures, to require their withdrawal for the reorganization; the 4th Indian Division, now commanded by Gen. Francis Tucker, had a brigade in Tobruk, one Barce and one in Benghazi; the 1st Armored Division, whose command had been taken by Gen. Messervy in place of Gen. Herben Lumsden, wounded during an air attack, from 3 January was employed by the 13 Corps, but had only the 2nd Armored Brigade (Gen. R. Briggs) and the support group (Gen. C.M. Vallentin), who was replacing the 7th support group. So Godwin-Austen "*you answered me-as Auchinleck expressed - to harass the enemy while awaiting new troops*"⁽⁶⁹⁾. This task was entrusted to Messervy, together with the guidance to conduct a defensive battle if necessary.

Messervy proposed to bring the 4th Indian Division to Ajdabiya and move the 2nd armored brigade at Giof el-Matar, but the suggestion did not find acceptance for the impossibility to supply so many men so far. On January 4 Auchinleck again wrote Ritchie: didn't see any signs of demoralization nor of combative deficiency in opponent and feared that Godwin-Austen was a little too inclined to see the situation in rosy hues. This would be a big mistake, because Rommel wasn't opponent that he or anyone could afford to underestimate. "*He is a clever tactician-* he pointed out - *although I have some doubts about his ability at a strategist!*" and suggested to make still training at the 2nd Armored Brigade, if appropriate, declaring himself willing to send Gott or others. Then he examined the assumptions about intentions of the opponent:

"I suppose there is the possibility that Rommel could prepare a counter-offensive with throw back and possibly retake Benghazi. However I don't think it's very likely or that he would go far, however, it would be typical for him and, if he did this attempt, you might be certain that his forces are well equipped, supplied and trained (...)"⁽⁷⁰⁾,

In view of the overall situation, Ritchie on January 14 he communicated to the Commander in Chief who is not considered prudent to begin an offensive against the positions of el Agheila before 15

February. He was sorry to admit it, but didn't see the ability to undertake large-scale operations before this date. "*Worst of all, of course, would be that the enemy could start again ...*" he concluded ⁽⁷¹⁾.

Meanwhile, Auchinleck had shown the Italian-German situation at Churchill in these terms:

"Here's a preview of possible enemy action. Resistance on Agheila-Marada. To keep the sector of Agheila is probably the Italian X Corps, including *Brescia* and *Pavia* divisions, reinforced by elements of the German 90th Light Division. The Italian motorized Corps, comprising the *Trento e Trieste* divisions and elements of the German 90th Light at Marada to prevent turning of Agheila from the South. The German 15th and 21st *Panzer* Division, and probably the *Ariete* Armored Division, will remain subject to counterattacks" ⁽⁷²⁾.

In those days, Churchill was in Washington at the Anglo-American Conference *Arcadia* (22 December-14 January) and "*it was not difficult for me to (...) understand what they meant those telegrams seemingly so innocent.*" Thus began to worry, in part because the unexpected entry into the war Japan had given to Australia and New Zealand the impression-not unjustified-of being suddenly exposed to the possibility of a direct involvement, and he foresaw the request of those Governments to withdraw from the overseas theatres of operation the sole divisions which he had (four in Australia and New Zealand). Replied thus:

"I think that means that the bulk of the seven-and-a-half enemy divisions managed to be rescued over the elbow of the Grande Sirte and that it will withdraw without obstacles along its lines of communications. I also note that there has been reported that nine merchant ships from 10,000 tons. reached Tripoli without damage. There had seemed to understand that you were convinced they could certainly cut out the Italian infantry Rommel with your advanced down the track by el-Abd, but now it is clear that it remained out of the safety net. The extent to which all affect the operation *Acrobat* [advance into Tripolitania]? The certain that you and your troops you did everything that was humanly possible, but we must face the facts as they are, and recognize that this will largely be about the operation *Gymnast* [British landings in French North Africa] is on that *Super Gymnast* [Anglo-American landings in French North Africa]" ⁽⁷³⁾.

The Italian-German resistance at Ajdabiya and the orderly retreat to el Agheila caused a strong disappointment with Churchill. It wasn't a simple setback, but was the probable failure or at least the reference of that landing

in French North Africa which were ready in Britain an Armored Division and three infantry, but that it was necessary to show the Vichy Government or to the victorious Weygand rapid advance of the 8th Army into Tripoli. To the obvious displeasure of the *Premier*, Auchinleck would give some comfort:

"I don't think - he answered on 12-January-you could say that the bulk of the enemy divisions escaped us. It is true that the enemy still speaks of divisions, but these divisions in name only. For example, we know that the actual of the German 90th Light Division, initially of 9000 men, are now reduced to 3,500, and have only one cannon.

I estimate that no more than one-third of the German-Italian forces both initial managed to overcome the Grande Sirte elbow, i.e. around 17,000 Germans and 18,000 Italians. These troops are very disorganized due to lack of senior officers, for lack of materials and, as a result of our continued pressure, are exhausted and certainly are worth less than what their actual number overall, 35,000 men, could assume (...)”⁽⁷⁴⁾,

and continued showing convinced the opportunity to send forward the preparations for *Acrobat*, promising not to let themselves be drawn into hasty and businesses claiming to be certain that “*Rommel is going through difficulties greater than those that we dare to think.*” Churchill is appeased, particularly when in a subsequent dispatch from Auchinleck took throughout that Ritchie was continuing in preparation and as, on the other hand, “*increase daily evidence of weakness and disorganization of the enemy*”⁽⁷⁵⁾.

As the year closed in Cyrenaica without a repeat of the battle of Beda Fomm, in Marmarica began the battle of British 30 corps to eliminate the last Italian-German resistance. But we must take a step back to delineate the progressive worsening of the situation. When the border defenses were completely isolated, the umbrella organization included the fort of Bardia on the orders of Gen. Schmitt and the Halfaya sector under the command of Gen. De Giorgis. The importance of this area stemmed from the fact that it blocked all communication line of the coastal strip. Originally consisted of a battalion to defend the pass, with a stop in the South Centre; a cornerstone of the company in the ruins of a few houses of Sollum Bassa and another of the company («Faltenbacher») to control the slight depression between the Halfaya and Italian stronghold «Cirener». Between 11 and 13 December, as we know, were flowed in the garrisons of the strongholds of Bir Ghirba, “Cova” and “D’Avanzo”.

De Giorgis has undergone a reconnaissance and had to give up an action for the reconquest of Sollum Alta, which would have been very comfortable, for lack of appropriate units qualitatively and quantitatively. The sector had hired a development front, compared with backgrounds from Egypt, about sixteen kilometers. Static German structures, the Halfaya lacked fire centers West and Northwest and did not present the excavation work that characterized the other strongpoints, and urgency Sollum Bassa resented that the location had been settled in defiance after the New Zealand occupation of Sollum Alta. It protected the landing at the small harbour and a group of wells, but was dominated by the spurs of Sollum Alta, which had nested the enemy immediately.

With the arrival of the units of the *Savona*, the defenses were reoccupied. Thus the III/15th infantry, with the small "D'Avanzo" garrison and light tanks, assumed responsibility for the Northwestern sector, while the German OASIS company and the assault company were sent to bolster the detachment of Sollum Bassa. On 15 December the British began a methodical bombardment day and night daily on positions, particularly intense on «Cirenef» and Sollum Bassa.

The first fire effects were muffled by the accuracy of the defensive arrangement, but on the second places, exposed to attack from the sea, manifested heavily causing major inconveniences because Sollum Bassa was the supplies valve and vacate by sea to and from Bardia and was the center of the water sector. Supplies from Bardia came through a big motorboat, insufficient in itself, but the difficulties were increased by the need to make landfall, -loading, unloading and departure within hours of darkness, and the inability to deal with sometimes the storm at sea. And that was all. Once landed, the supplies had to be brought to the Halfaya and subsequently to "Faltenbachef" and "Cirenef", by the few existing vehicles, whose number diminished every day. Of course, in parallel to the problem of supplies was that of evictions: the sick and wounded who could not be treated on the spot, prisoners (a hundred). All staff who made the food situation. In essence, the sector, which now had exhausted stocks, living hand to mouth and to ration reduced to the minimum indispensable.

When the *Panzergruppe* left the positions of Ain el-Gazala

and Ritchie said Norrie to clean up the border (12 December), the 30th Corps had the 2nd South African Division of Gen. De Villiers (with the 3rd, 4th and 6th Brigade and Divisional units), as well as Corps support. The 5th New Zealand Brigade had been withdrawn from the border.

On 16 December, at dawn, after a preparation of an hour and a half, the 1st South African Brigade (Gen. C.E. Borain) attacked a decisive attack with armored car unit competition on the southern front of Bardia, the subsector of the III/40th infantry. The armored vehicles were soon to leave the field because of the extremely brutal anti-tank fire, but the infantry arrived until cured. Repeated efforts failed to open the gap and towards the 17:00 the enemy had to give up the attempt. Obviously, though, it had the feeling of being able to pass, because the 17 and 18 December shooting the action, always against the III/40th infantry. Finally, convinced of the futility of these initiatives, in the next series of episodes here and there against the device works. "*Gan. De Villiers was written-found that the strength and morale of the enemy were much higher than expected and (...) wisely stopped operations after two days of combat*"⁽⁷⁶⁾.

To force the defenses of the fort it was decided to use the entire 2nd South African Division, reinforced by the 8th and 44th *Royal Tanks* equipped with *Valentine* and *Matilda*, since New Zealand Cavalry Regiment equipped with light tanks, from 67th and 68th field heavy artillery, as well as by 1st Polish field artillery.

On the morning of 31 December the attack conducted by the 3rd and 4th Brigade (Gen. A.A. Hayton) began Southeast of the road to fort Capuzzo, with the powerful aid of the *Ajax* and the gunboat HMS *Aphis* and tell an intense aerial bombardment launched by-group no. 270 of *Western Desert Air Force*. At noon the whole sector South of Bir-Scheme had been cut off; in the evening the South African penetration had reached the edge of *Wadi el-Mrega*, but still remained contained, thanks to a defense that had counterattack reoccupied in the afternoon some strongholds straddling the road to fort Capuzzo. For the entire night artillery fire continued across the front of attack and deep, then at 04:15 of 1 January began prepared shooting again. The main effect of the bombardment was to stop any telephone connection, the only existing type. After an hour in the dark more complete, the 1st South African Brigade and

the 44th *Royal Tanks* attacked the works 17, 19 and 21 by breaking the defensive perimeter. Through the gap attack is sent out in three directions: westwards against the 1st company of the frontier guard and II/16th infantry; northward against a defensive Suspenders manned quickly from Italian and German elements; eastward against the 4 Squadron *Genova Cavallena*.

Of the very serious situation that was creating, however, the command of the fort still had no clear vision or motorcyclists sent to the sectors managed to make his way as a result enemy fire thumped the internal communications. By 09:00 the works of the 1st border guard company, of 4th squadron of the *Genova* and four of those of the II/16th infantry regiment had fallen.

The southern sector was now devoid of organized resistance. Throughout the day continued the struggle led by the still active (North, Northwest and Southwest) and from the reserve, fully employed to counter and curb penetration. In the late afternoon on Gen. Schmitt had issued a desperate appeal to De Giorgis, at Halfaya, giving news of the dramatic circumstances in which paid. Unfortunately De Giorgis had to meet to be able to intervene in any way.

During the fight the wire connection was restored, albeit sporadically, and some works regained and this allowed to block the attack by South Africans, but of course it was delayed the issue a little, because around midnight, this time with full Moonlight, De Villiers became a decisive effort. The reserve was literally inundated and it fell again the works previously re-occupied. At 02:00 of 2 January, since the situation worsened, Col. Papas came from Gen. Schmitt and proposed the blasting of mine for the destruction of the aqueducts. Schmitt was in conversation with the principal collaborators and admitted being unable to cope with the attack not existing more forces sealing the flaw. Feeling "*any further bloodshed was now useless*," decided the surrender of the square, with the prior authorization received from the command of *Panzergruppe*, and the destruction of what could be useful to the adversary, the aqueducts and the food, even the Axis troops that they could resume Bardia. So at 09:00 was ordered the ceasefire. Moreover, the Southwest sector, which was not achieved by bike messengers, remained on their positions until the morning of the 3rd,

When two Italian officers, accompanied by South Africans, informed the Commander of the surrender.

Surrendered 2,442 Italian and 2,143 German. According to British sources, on the other hand, prisoners amounted to about 8,000 ⁽⁷⁷⁾. Italian losses were *discovered* 111 dead, 196 wounded and 28 missing, but probably should be increased by at least 50%. South African were 139 dead and 295 injured. In addition, 1,171 British prisoners were freed.

The fall of Bardia scored for the Halfaya sector the disappearance of the logistics base and a greater enemy pressure on Northern positions. Known the fall of the fort, De Giorgis sent a dispatch to Bastico stating that the incident is not the mind of defenders reduces Halfaya and closing the message: "*I understand that this sector does not have any major importance in the overall picture, but wonder also be replenished because we don't ask other than continuing to defend these positions entrusted to our honor*" ⁽⁷⁸⁾. On 4 January De Giorgis proposed to tempt Comando Superiore the evacuation by sea of the remaining forces (about 5,600 men), if it had not been possible to the supply of food and water, just enough for all to 6 January. Even Major. Bach, Commander of the German troops, turned to the *Panzergruppe*, pointing out the near exhaustion of supplies and asking for supplies to avoid surrender to hunger. The more likely the enemy, aware of the difficult food situation, would not have shown great hurry for decisive action, letting the force wear the defenders to lower their weapons.

The Comando Supremo, informed by Bastico, did know he had already previously considered the issue of recovery by sea and due to conclude with the inability of its implementation, especially at that moment when all ships were engaged to transport reinforcements and equipment to Northern Africa. It would be however made the maximum effort to continue the supply of food and ammunition with a daily launch 8-10 tons of food and 6 of water. Such intervention was also ensured by the German side. The 7 January De Giorgis indicated that the launch carried out by German aircraft in four nights correspond to half-rations and that a further reduction of troops could withstand ration until the 9th.

Meanwhile, artillery and enemy aircraft continued pounding strongholds "Halfaya" and "Cirener", causing significant losses

to the defense. A British patrol boat cruised with insistence on Gulf of Sollum as likely to observe artillery shoots made on coastal wells and detect targets hit in different *uidian*. The systematic airstrikes resumed at dawn of January 8 destroyed the last remaining wells usable and the Office of the German military attaché in Rome set out the practical impossibility to ensure the supply of a sufficient quantity of drinking water by means of aircraft. In fact, a aerial supply drop took place in the night of the 10th, despite the disruption caused by the *Western Desert Air Force*, managed to launch a water quantity completely negligible, and most importantly, unsuitable containers, broke in the fall, damaging the food.

On 11 January the 1st South African Brigade (Gen. F. W. Cooper) attacked Sollum Bassa and after repeated assaults managed to steal some centers of resistance, while the rest of the sector was kept under pressure. The violent action continued on 12 January with air and naval support; Finally, after bitter fighting, at 09:00 of the 13th the town of Sollum Bassa was occupied by the 2nd *Transvaal Scottish Regiment*. Some stations still resisted, as well as remained in Italian hands the Gulf Coast of Sollum for a distance of approximately five kilometers. The 13th began the agony of the *Savona*. Lost water wells, at the following day the 14th De Giorgis said that:

“as the morale and the spirit of the troops still respond to all causes of depression caused by dietary deficiencies, lack of drinking water and by the constant pounding naval offensive, I must unfortunately conclude a major emphasis in organic decay of the troops and some cases of insanity among the sick and the wounded, who failed to cure. These factors influence, thus, severely combative efficiency of the units”.

At 07:00 of 16 January, De Giorgis indicated that, due to the lack of air supply in the nights on 15 and 16 January, units had to eat only for that day. As a result, if overnight were not really enough food launched he would be found in the imperative need for painful but offer the enemy surrender to not let men die of hunger and thirst. Especially since the sanitation conditions were exacerbated alarmingly. All, Italians and Germans, had done what it could humanly claim. But even that night was something, so at 07:00 of 17 January De Giorgis is resigned to send his chief of

Staff to treat with Gen. De Villiers, who received some requests, namely: the suspension of offenses at the beginning of the negotiations; the acceptance of the destruction of heavy weapons, including anti-aircraft and anti-tank artillery; the assistance and the immediate evacuation of the wounded and sick.

At 15:40 came from Rome a message with which Cavallero informed Mussolini that, in view of the impossibility to get food to the Halfaya sector, left to De Giorgis full judgment of the situation and implicitly approved of the decisions that he had considered taking ⁽⁷⁹⁾. Rather tardy. That morning, Kesselring had intervened at Cavallero stating that the aerial supply were insurmountable difficulties, "*bring this to your knowledge – the Field Marshal's letter said-to enable a review of the situation of Halfaya. I personally do not think more can extend the Halfaya Defense successfully*" ⁽⁸⁰⁾.

De Villiers had planned the attack, in which assigned the role of spearhead to the 42nd Royal Tanks and an important task to the 1st Free French brigade, just for the 18th. At the ceasefire the Halfaya sector strength was equal to 3,400 Italian and 2,124 Germans ⁽⁸¹⁾. "*Few usable weapons fell into our hands and no notable relief-supply reported Auchinleck-prisoners were exhausted from lack of nourishment*" ⁽⁸²⁾.

Churchill, that very little had digested the collapse of *Crusader*, sent to Auchinleck a telegram with a somewhat sarcastic: "*Congratulations for another brilliant and timely success*" ⁽⁸³⁾.

* * *

At the end of December the organic situation of large units operating in Cyrenaica was definitely serious. Excluding the Italian forces of Bardia and the *Savona*, a total of about 8,000 men calculated, the amount of losses incurred since the beginning of *Crusader*-including evictions due to illness-reached around 34,000 men:

Grand Unit	Force to		Comparative Losses
	15.11.1941	28.12.1941	
<i>Brescia</i> Inf, Div.	6,585.	3,810	2,775
<i>Bologna</i> . Inf, Div	6,519	1,820	4,699
<i>Pavia</i> Inf, Div	6,383	3,400	2,983
<i>Trento</i> Inf, Div	9,041	4,220	4,821
<i>Trieste</i> Inf, Div	10,809	2,200	8,609
<i>Ariete</i> Arm. Div	6,231	1,500	4,731
Corps & Army Support	12,195	7,000	5,195
Total	57,763	23,950	33,813

More precisely, at the date of January 8, 1942 combat losses of large units and supporting troops (always excluding frontier defenses) will get around about 1,320 deaths, 3,100 wounded and 13,000 missing, for a total of 17,420 men.

The Comando Superiore did a calculation of availability in Libya

National troops	152,000 men
Libyan troops	23,000 men.
German troops	54,000 men.
Civilian and militarized workers.	20,000 men
Total	249,000 men.

Of these, just 24,000 Italians and 10,000 Germans were at Ajdabiya.

“Supercomando strives to draw men from the backline-Montezemolo in Rome wrote-but encountered desperate resistance. An example the fort of Tripoli alone were from Intendenza surveyed 1,100 messes officers and NCOs (with a Cook, a Scullion and a waiter on average per mess = 3,300 men.)” ⁽⁸⁴⁾.

Undoubtedly the “*quality*” of an soldiers could be presumed to be somewhat lacking in staff to retrieve drawing men back to 125,000, however something was still possible draw and on this basis the Comando Superiore asked other divisions, but simply for arms and materials the recovery, even if partial, of the existing great units, limiting the sending of complements from Italy of specialists, which was very difficult to find in the backline. For materials, the order of

earlier it was so designated: tanks and trucks. They were expected with impatience the *Littorio* division to return the *Ariete* to the organic efficiency.

Quite rightly the Comando Superiore decided to take initiatives even in the order, because the problem of force did not appear easy solution. The 71 existing divisions (but not everyone efficient) were scattered in eight operating theatres or sectors: 8 in Libya, 3 in Russia, 3 in the Aegean Sea, 8 in Greece, 6 in Albania, 4 and a half in Montenegro, 11 in Croatia and the remaining 27 and a half in Italy. Of these, 6 were in the Islands, 6 and a half at the French border, 6 in coastal defense or oriented to special applications and 9 in the central reserve. The so-called central reserve had actually a texture more apparent than real, being formed by the *Littorio* Arm. Div. and the Piave Mot. Div., in being sent or provided for use in North Africa; by the incomplete *Centauro* Arm. Div, 2nd Celere Div., Parachutists Div. *Spezia* Semi Motorized Div, and very incomplete occupation Divisions *Murge*, *Macerata* and *Emilia*, virtually all three under constitution. The number one preoccupation was represented by reordering of the C.S.I.R. (Russian Expeditionary Corp), who had reported heavy losses and the need for urgent action.

Therefore, Bastico, without even waiting for the authorization of the central authorities, established that the divisions *Brescia*, *Bologna*, *Pavia*, *Trento* and *Sabratha* - i.e. those online - reorganizing them according to the module "Infantry Division A.S. 42"⁽⁸⁵⁾. It was an organic derived from tables established in 1941 by the staff of the R. Army for "D. Mot. A.S." type, but with the adjustments suggested by experience, situation and inability to produce motorized units. The essential differences between the two types of rules & regulations consisted in inclusion of Deputy Commander General of Division and in the different distribution of anti-tank and accompanying weapons. These were not the most centralized in the fourth company of the battalions, but assigned evenly to all fusilier companies, which constituted, among other things a considerable increase in anti-tank defense. The artillery regiment also received a group of 88/55 (or 75 or 90/53) for anti-tank and anti-aircraft use with a shot. Services units were drastically reduced. Except the health and livelihood sections, all other units (field hospitals, ambulances, surgical and radiological bakers team, mobile workshop, etc.) were centralized at the Corps level.

Overall, the Division was to count 6,942 people.

Only the *Trieste* and *Ariete* were reordered according to a partly *ad hoc* structure. The first motorized Division, although still did not have the resources to be tracked and needed protection. It lost the bersaglieri Regiment and gained an armored car battalion ⁽⁸⁶⁾ and a medium tank battalion. Sorting of infantry regiments and artillery followed the Division tables “type AS 42“, however, the battalions were on three companies instead of four ⁽⁸⁷⁾. In total, the Division had to count 6,671 men. The *Ariete* Arm. Div. bought a armored cars battalion and self-propelled anti-tank battalion from 47/32 ⁽⁸⁸⁾, artillery regiment also included two groups from 75/18 self-propelled ⁽⁸⁹⁾. For the rest, the divisional structure was not substantial changes ⁽⁹⁰⁾. Total strength: 8,829 men.

The changes were, as was mentioned previously, explained in facing almost exclusively mechanized divisions; the uniformity of the soil, which facilitated the use of uniform constitution unit; in the advantages that this organic constitution provided for the reorganization of divisions and, finally, the inadequacy of vehicles and service parts. As a result, a critique of character order does not even arise, although it is fair to emphasize certain limitations: the divisions “type A.S. 42” became essentially stopping large units capable of withstanding attacks by tanks supported by infantry; all, including the *Trieste* and the *Ariete* (in his bersaglieri Regiment), lost maneuverability due to lack of transportation on their own. However it was not without reference to the formations use specifically Theatre tactical operations; for how much. I had tried to fix the functional criteria on the basis of the experience gained. These principles could be as follows: availability of six battalions well-endowed by anti-tank weapons in terms of actual units of constitute use, without need to de-bone someone for the benefit of others; staff kept to a minimum to reduce the logistical burden of the Division; assigning a group clearly suitable for anti-tank action artillery regiment; uniformity of the battalion and company level; availability of vehicles for towing or transporting only firearms and for the needs of life.

Thus tidy, it was believed that the Division type “A.S. 42” had

way to settle a defense on a front of 30-35 kilometers, with four cornerstones of battalion (larger diameter on 7,000 meters) in the first Echelon, interspersed by 1,500-3,000 meters, and two cornerstones of second battalion Echelon. However, the fact remained that-impossible to their immediate implementation-divisions were to be gradually brought to the degree provided for.

In essence, for all units had to prevail the concept to rebuild as soon as possible, with availability in the Act, the basic elements of each organic unit (ie.: Battalion on two companies, two battalions of the Regiment, etc.), and then gradually to the formation of additional elements in relation to the influx of material and accessories. As for the media Corps, their reorganization was forcibly sent back to a second time. Meanwhile the 7th and 9th bersaglieri remained available to the X and XXI Corps was expected to order on an armored battalion and one motorized to give life to a recon group or mechanized Reserve Corps, together with a group of tanks.

On the subject of transport, it took 150 cars, 1,600 trucks (half light and; half heavy) and 250 tractors for the seven divisions. To ensure services of Intendenza from Tripoli to el Agheila (1,700 km) 800 trucks were needed. Altogether, the requirement to complete the few existing was about 2,800 vehicles.

On January 5 arrived in Tripoli, the first strong convoy with ammunition, fuel and food, 54 tanks, 19 armored cars and many anti-tank pieces. With these materials and with those of the successive additions, the *Ariete* and the *Panzerdivisionen* regained vigor. On 7 January the *Afrikakorps* had 23 armored cars and 84 tanks efficient. In the following days went by the German workshops another 32 tanks repaired. Now, 116 *Panzer* more 84 M. 13 Italians were something respectable. Rommel immediately thought about how to exploit it to the fullest.

For sum of operation *Crusader*, the losses of the Italian armed forces in Libya in 15 November1941 - 15 January1942 period were valued at 1,945 officers, 2,674 NCO's, 34,974 soldiers national ranks, 2,592 Libyans, for a total of 42,185 men, of which 39,000 of the R. Army.

Without considering the Mainland material submissions, the three

Corps lost 3,200 automatic weapons of the units, 89 mortars of 81 mm and 307 of 45 mm, 63 medium tanks and 187 (i.e. all) light tanks, 25 armored cars (i.e. all), 320 field guns and 584 anti-aircraft guns of various caliber, 5,000 vehicles.

4. THE STRUGGLE FOR MARITIME SUPPLIES.

Commenting on the events of December 1941-January 1942, Churchill said "*at this point it should be noted once again the decisive influence of the sea on the tide of 8th Army*"⁽⁹¹⁾. We could make our remarked.

In November 1941, Britain was in the Mediterranean, his best time. The destruction of the *Duisburg* convoy (8 November) joined the *Maritza* convoy (24 November)⁽⁹²⁾, then the armed motorship *Adriatico* in Greek waters, and the tanker *Mantovani* and the destroyers *Da Mosto* en route to the West of Malta (December 1), which led the monthly percentage of losses equal to 70% of the transported materials, a negative point never reached until then and not ever reached again.

Given the serious crisis occurred, *Supermarina* studied a plan of urgent transport of war materials using warships, based on this concept: cruisers and submarines would be left for Libya by Italian torpedo boat, the place and some destroyers would have made the load in Argostoli, Navarino or Suda. The program included: a submarine every two days for Bardia or Derna (food and fuel); one or two destroyers to Benghazi and Derna (fuel), making shuttling between Benghazi and Derna-Suda; one or two special vessels per week from Brindisi and Taranto to Benghazi (various materials); three cruisers, in exceptional cases, such as the *Cadorna* to Benghazi and *Da Barbiano* and *Di Giussano* for Tripoli, date to be determined.

For the December 13 was set the beginning of the operation M. 41, i.e. the departure of a large convoy severely scalded. In this context, the 4th Naval Division, with the *Da Barbiano* and *Di Giussano*, sailed for Tripoli twenty-four hours prior to the loading of gasoline required for the merchant ships were in the area of arrival the indispensable air escort. The route was Cape Bon-Kerkennah Islands. The movement was spotted by a *Wellington*, as well as an *Cant Z* aircraft reported off the coast of Algeria four

British destroyers headed to Malta. The top speed of the destroyers took them to Cape Bon at 03:00 of 13 December, while the cruisers rounding the lit lighthouse. It seems that enemy ships were not identified, because under the coastline, the fact is that the Adm. Toscano, Commander of the Division, probably convinced of having to wait for an upcoming aerial attack from Malta, suddenly (03:20 hours) ordered a reversal of route of 180° for counter maneuver, causing a rapid meeting of the two formations. The enemy attack with torpedoes was almost immediate: the *Da Barbiano* sank without being able to shoot a single Cannon, the *Di Giussano* he open fire but soon becomes immobilized and is pushed overboard, at 04:20 broke in two.

The operation M. 41 provided for the transfer to Libya of eight merchant ships in three convoys. The first with three Italian motorships, the second with the German steamer *Ankara* and two Italians, the third with the motorships *Filzi* and *Del Greco*. Due to an initial orders, these last two left Messina on 12 December bound for Taranto, to rejoin other ships. The next day, at 02:10 when they were about to put the safety route to the port of Taranto, a salvo of torpedoes sank both. The loss was painful because it was fast boats just entered into service, with a capacity of 8-9,000 tons. and a full-load speed on 14-16 knots, that could be thought a way out of the difficulties of maritime traffic.

Meanwhile, aerial reconnaissance on Alexandria and the Eastern Mediterranean made reports that induced *Supermarina* to believe that the Mediterranean Fleet had sailed. As a result, he ordered the return of convoys and support group. Was the entire fleet at sea: four battleships (*Duilio*, *Doria*, *Littorio* and *Vittorio Veneto*), five cruisers, 25 destroyers and three torpedo boats, but the ships were split into several groups, placed under a convoy escort tasks slow and poorly maneuverable. In addition the information in possession of *Supermarina* weren't accurate. Knowing that the *Ark Royal* had been sunk on 17 November by *U 81*, we were at sea the three battleships of Cunningham, while one, *Barham* had been sunk on 25 November by the German submarine *U-331* ⁽⁹³⁾ and the other could not move for lack of destroyer escort. Formation out of Alexandria was simply that of the Adm. Vian with four light cruisers and the tanker

Breconshire, discussed earlier. At the end of the operation, on the morning of the 14th the *Vittorio Veneto* was hit by a torpedo launched from a British submarine, stationed at the exit of the Straits of Messina.

Returning to Taranto steamers and warships, was organized the operation M. 42. It was, this time, a formation with four merchant single convoy during most of the trip and to employ the Cruiser divisions according to their organic formation: the 7th Naval Division (Adm. De Coutten) with the support group *Duilio* (Adm. Bergamini) and the 3rd Naval Division (Adm. Parona) with *Littorio*, *Doria* and *Caesar* in support group (Adm. Jachino, superior Commander at sea). Arrived off the coast of Misurata, three ships- the *Pisani*, the *Monginevro* and the *Napoli* -with their escort would have continued on to Tripoli, and a German-*Ankara*-with two destroyers of the escort would have directed toward Benghazi.

Without going into the details of the battle, very short, took place on the evening of December 17 and known as the first battle of Sirte-and which, moreover, was determined by random encounter of two supply operations, M 42 and the Adm. Vian ⁽⁹⁴⁾ - the said convoy arrived at destination unscathed: the three Italian boats entered the harbor of Tripoli between 10:00 and 14:00 of the 19 December; the *Ankara* at 09.30 on the same day reached Benghazi.

On balance, the balance of this great effort and strong oil consumption might look modest, but the overall picture seen on the other side of the Hill was even worse. A strong impulse to the current reversal was visited by the German submarine *U-boote*. In late November, Hitler had decided to bring from twenty-one to thirty-six submarines in the Mediterranean. There *Seekriegsleitung* (Directorate of maritime war, i.e. German *Supermarina*) calculated using such means to employ eighteen in naval operations while the remainder would be predictably into "work". After an initial orientation of the *Seekriegsleitung* to concentrate the ships in the Western Mediterranean for the possibility of a Anglo-Gaullist French landing in North Africa, Adm. Doenitz asked insistently to abandon the dangerous thickening of vessels around Gibraltar, in an area of low traffic and high casualties, while maintaining a convenient gravitation in the Eastern basin. Doenitz was not conducive to the use of a strong

number of submarines in the Mediterranean: three in the West and as such, East of Gibraltar, more than a fortnight in the East the basin seemed sufficient. This way you would be crippled war against merchant traffic in the Atlantic, namely in the main theatre of naval operations.

In mid-December a dozen U-boote, about twenty-four available, operated in the Eastern Mediterranean especially undermined the stretch of sea between Alexandria and Tobruk. It must be said that the activities of German submarines was very fruitful. From October to December, they sank the *Ark Royal*, *Barham*, a cruiser, a sloop, a Corvette, a gunboat, two large landing craft and eleven merchantships. The results, objectively better than those achieved by Italian boats were to be attributed mostly to higher technical features: modern buildings, increased speed of the surface and underwater, with autonomy, improved detection equipment and launch very quickly-diving, agility and strength. And also the terms of use were better: *U-boote* were created essentially for the merchant traffic war, then their use never found hesitation, where Italian submarines were used generally in static alignments for the ambush rather than aggressive search of the enemy. But it was an Italian boat to pass naval superiority hit the side of the axis. During the night between 18 and 19 December, the submarine *Sciré* (Cap. . corv. J. Valerio Borghese) brought up in Alexandria three assault transport of R. Marina. Means, boldly penetrated in the port, they undermine the battleships *Queen Elizabeth* and *Valiant* by damaging them severely ⁽⁹⁵⁾.

In tables referred to in the following pages are the personal data and the material transported from Italy in Libya in 1941. The premises are figures for the period June-December 1940 as a useful complement and comparison.

As regards the situation of the Ships-Mercantile require the following elements:

Consistency at 10. 1.1940,	3,318. 129 t.s.l.
Consistency at 1.1.1941 ~..	1,981,168 t.s.l.
ships sunk or lost in 1941	503,656 t.s.l.
remainder	1,477,512 t.s.l.

increases for new construction, purchases,
recoveries, indented or foreign ships built..
the consistency on 31.12.1941.

181,307 t.s.l.
1,658,819 t.s.l

In particular, it is interesting to see arrivals in Libya during the period between 1 August 1941 and 18 January 1942: 22,370 men, 48 cannon, 2,128 trucks and 90 tanks.

The December 29 Mussolini sent a Hitler a letter, probably conceived after the loss of the cruisers *Da Barbiano* and *Giussano* and the fast motorships *Filzi* and *Del Greco*. Priority arguments were two: supplies to Libya and the guerrillas in Yugoslavia. On the first point, Mussolini expressed in these terms:

“The battle that took place in recent weeks in Cyrenaica is complete without losers and winners. We certainly won, if we could transport the men and the means to feed the battle.

The outcome of the battle was compromised by the sea, not on land. Serious was the loss of the entire convoy of seven ships on November 9, but no less serious was the loss of two ships-the day November 14 ships carrying German and Italian divisions of tanks: were sunk by a submarine in the Gulf of Taranto.

The last convoy of four ships arrived, but to protect the journey of 20 000 t. we spent 100 thousand tons of warships. This imposed such us naphtha consumption now prohibitive simple strength power in Tripolitania, unless we open the way of Tunis, who built this aspect is infinitely cheaper.

When I write, it is given to know the intentions of the enemy. You make the success and given the situation in the Far East will simply strengthen, or attempts to break through our new line up-just outlined-to concentrate on Tripoli?

To avoid the dangers ahead, so that we can ensure the Tripolitania and regain the initiative, the problem of Tunisian bases is absolutely crucial.

I don't need to explain the enormous benefits that would come to full use in the Tunisian bases I say that the strategic situation of the Axis would be overturned. While our traffic of men and weapons would be almost undisturbed, the enemy would literally choked traffic. The consequences of this would be incalculable, as would the consequences of incalculable loss of Tripolitania.

There are two ways to reach our goal, which is to be able to freely dispose of French bases in Tunisia: or via agreements or that of force.

Of course we must do all we can to achieve this through an agreement. The France won't give anything for nothing. Ask offsets

Fuel Transported to Libya in 1941
(in Tons)

Year	Italian Army		Italian Navy		Italian Air Force		German Forces		Civilian		Total	
	Sent	Arrived	Sent	Arrived	Sent	Arrived	Sent	Arr.	Sent	Arr.	Sent	Arrived
1940 Jun -Dec									3,115	3,115	47,520	47520
1941												
January	2,768	2,768	-	-	129	129	200	-	-	-	3,097	2,897
February	2,600	2,600	-	-	2,000	2,000	7,042	6,082	-	-	11,642	10,682
March	1,960	1,960	-	-	2,099	2,099	-	-	-	-	4,059	4,059
April	9,850	8,029	6,122	6,122	3,332	3,332	6,024	4,393	1,800	1,800	27,128	23,676
May	12,131	12,131	6,024	6,024	972	972	-	-	900	900	20,027	20,027
June	14,509	14,509	10,960	10,960	5,670	3,752	4,711	4,711	-	-	38,932	35,850
July	12,494	5,494	35	35	360	360	6,534	5,534	147	147	19,570	11,570
August	17,277	17,277	162	162	3,232	3,232	16,285	15,781	749	749	377,705	37,201
September	10,793	8,593	-	-	1,255	972	5,711	3,843	-	-	17,759	13,108
October	7,836	6,330	143	143	1,294	838	5,649	4,449	191	191	15,113	11,951
November	12,973	350	9,060	-	3,825	935	5,252	1,154	278	32	31,388	2,471
December	3,265	2,881	1,370	1,370	1,509	1,509	1,373	1,373	-	-	7,517	7,133
Total 1941	108,426	82,922	33,876	24,826	25,677	20,130	58,811	47,320	4,065	3,819	233,937	180,6254

Personnel and Material Transported to Libya in 1941

Year	Men			Material (Tons)		
	Sent	Arrived	Not Arr	Sent	Arrive	Not Arr
1940 Jun -Dec	28,299	28,249	50 (1)	304,467	297,475 (2)	6,992 (3)
1941						
January	12,491	12,214	277	50,505	49,084	1,421
February	19,557	19,557	-	80,357	79,183	1,174
March	20,975	20,184	791	101,800	92,753	9,047
April	20,968	19,926	1042	88,597	81,472	7,125
May	12,552	9,958	2,594	75,367	69,331	6,036
June	12,866	12,866	-	133,331	125,076	8,255
July	16,141	15,767	374	77,012	62,276	14,736
August	18,288	16,753	1,535	96,021	83,956	12,065
September	12,717	6,630	6,087	94,115	67,513	26,602
October	4,046	3,451	595	92,449	73,614	18,835
November	4,872	4,628	244	79,208	29,843	49,365
December	1,748	1,074	674	47,680	39,092	8,588
Total 1941	157,221	143,008	14,213 (4)	1,016,442 (2)	853,193	163,249 (2)

(1) Does not come in June..

(2) Including fuel provided in the following table

(3) Lost during the month of December 6,982 tons

(4) Referred to 6,086 belonging to the German forces.

Personnel Artillery and Means Transported to Libya
From 1 August 1941 to 18 January 1942

	Means of Transport employed			Personnel			Artillery					Motorized Means			
	Steam Ship	Warship & Submarine	Air (Journeys)	Officers	NCO	Troops	A/A Gun of 20 mm	A/T Gun	Small Caliber	Medium Caliber	Anti-Aircraft	Cars & Special	trucks	Tanks	Trailers
Sent	110	19	1,034	2,955	2,327	27,117	104	276	153	48	5	582	2,466	136	291
Not Arrive	22	-	-	286	410	4,747	25	67	12	-	-	198	338	46	90
arrived	88	19	1,034	2,669	1,917	22,370	79	209	141	48	5	384	2,128	90	201

during the Armistice and certain military facilities to defend themselves. I firmly believe that the game is worth these candles (...). If the French were any agreement-even the most generous-I now declare you, Führer, I prefer to bring my armored divisions in Tunisia, rather than see them disappear into the Sea en route to Tripoli. In general thesis, I think we must find ways to clarify the attitude of France in our concerns (...). ⁽⁹⁶⁾.

Hitler will respond after a few days in extremely cautious and elusive tone: according to him there was nothing to be done until the France had not demonstrated in a concrete way to be on the side of the Axis.

NOTE TO CHAPTER 10

- (1) Diary Cavallero, date 7.12.1941.
- (2) Cavallero tenaciously argued on the subject. On 1 December had submitted a note to Mussolini, urged him to intervene: "(...) *General von Rintelen told me that the German side is maintained this position, ... that France took in May to take this step and that you try to do to fix the date. His excellence Maggolini informs me that the German Armistice Commission is negotiating in Wiesbaden. various issues that are on the table, including France on the problem of Bizerte, but continues with maddening slowness, and the meeting of Committee Chairmen is planned only in January (...)*" Mussolini had immediately written to Hitler (letter No. 2.12.1941-annex 25).
- (3) Diary Cavallero, f. No. 735/41 date 5.12.1941, in Italian translation done the German military attaché's Office.
- (4) DSCS, tele 31062 date 7.12.1941.
- (5) E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, pp. 91-92.
- (6) Newsletter 5.12.1941, of 23:51 hours of the *Panzergruppe*, in Italian translation from this care.
- (7) The historical Diary of XXI Corps, tele 6991 op. date 8.12.1941. At 11:00 Navarini turned again to *Panzergruppe*: "*Not able to maintain Division Pavia movement, all troops are currently still in place. It outlines new armored vehicles Axis Road threat. Wonder instructions*".
- (8) in particular, were recently attained two messages of praise by Mussolini, and one was personal regarding Rommel: "Please communicate personally to General Rommel, that your dependencies has so brilliantly commanded troops at the battle of Marmanca, an expression of my complacency, adding that even in the future, I count on him". (DSCS, tele 31045/0 p. date 4.12.1941, 14:15 hours).
- (9) DSCSAS, tele 1 op. 20655 date 8.12. 1941, at 19:00. A few days later, Leut. Col. Montezemolo returned to Libya, who had a copy of the minutes, the transmitted confidentially to the Comando Supremo enclosing a note of observations obtained by repeated contacts with the protagonists-annex 26.
- (10) E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 94.
- (11) The historical Diary of XXI Corps.
- (12) DSCSAS, f. 20680/01/0 p. date 9.12.1941.
- (13) It should be noted that, in relation to the order.-but not because the order setting out the - Comando Superiore returned to the Gambara bring with him Gen. Mannerini and the leader of G.S., Leut. Col. Manardi; Piazzoni went to CAM bring with him his Chief of G.S., Leut. Col. Manardi; the CAM Chief Operations Office, Maj. Ruta, passed to the *Trieste* as head of the G.S.. In other words, in full retreat maneuver the CAM lost Commander, Deputy Commander, head of the G.S. and head office operations, and the *Trieste*, Commander and Chief of G.S.! The whole thing is not really seem right more suitable of course regardless of the personal qualities of the substitutes.
- (14) The historical Diary of Corps of Maneuver. The episode is remembered from EMILIO FAIDELLA, *L'Italia nella seconda guerra mondiale*; Bologna, Cappelli, 1959, p. 391, but, perhaps due to typographical error, placed under the date of 1 December, instead of 10.

- (15) The *Bologna* regrouped as follows: Infantry Division Command, 39th (with Regiment Command and one battalion of the formation), 40th infantry (with Regiment Command and one battalion of the formation), 1/86th infantry-*Sabratha*, 205th artillery (Regiment Command and with a mixed group), divisional units and organic services and minor reinforcement units.
- (16) DSCS, tele 31075/Op. date 9.12.1941, 13 hours.
- (17) On 10 December was caught by S.I.M. a telephone conversation between the OKW and the German Embassy in Rome. Gen. Warlimont said, among other things, to von Rintelen: "With the American entry into the war the Northern African countries have taken on a new aspect (...). If the Italians again reflect upon our opinion on this subject [Bisena] answer that does not exclude the possibility that I might be the issue indeed accelerated. However, it is in our interests not to lose the foot, under any circumstances, on the North African territory (...). We would like, if you go to a solution, you hold the helm (...)"»
- (18) DSCS, letter s.n. date 12.12.1941 of superior Commander-Appendix 27.
- (19) ALBERT KESSELRING, *Memorie di guerra*, Garzanti, Milan 1954, p.102.
- (20) DSCS, tele 51/M date 10.12.1941, at 23.
- (21) DSCS, tele 31089/Op. Date 11.12.1941, 21 hours.
- (22) DSCSAS, tele 01/20923/Op. date 12.12.1941.
- (23) DSCS, tele 52/M 11.12.1941, 17 hours, Lt. Col. Montezemolo at Comando Supremo.
- (24) I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 81, but according to M. CARVER, op. cited above, pp. 166-167, the Godwin-Austen was different. He wanted to go head-on with the 5th New Zealand Brigade and the Polish Brigade, the 1st astride the via Balbia and the escarpment, and Rommel's right wrap with the 4th Indian Division reinforced by all infantry tanks available. This would reach first Bir Halegh el Eleba,-then Tmimi and later Derna. The 7th Armored Division was given the task of protecting the exposed wing. As proposed, the plan is not convincing: the weaknesses lie in the role attributed to the 4th Indian, overkill for an Infantry Division, and assigned to the 7th Armored, too mild. However, things went badly because Messervy attacked on Bir Halegh el Eleba-without making a large southward movement, being so against Alam Hamza, and what should have been a winding without difficulty, a typical inconveniences part of the march in the desert, turned unexpectedly into an organized attack in defense, no matter how much judgment.
- (25) To tell the truth, only the *Pavia* would be on the front row, with *Brescia* to "immediate support" his left wing and *Trento* to "immediate support" to his right, but Navarini, come on place, changed the initial orders, advancing slightly the *Brescia*.
- (26) The Division had been compelled by the opposing pressure to begin the movement around 13:00 and Gen. De Stefanis had defined "*precarious*" the situation of the *Trento*.
- (27) Report on the operation of the CAM from 11 to 21 December 1941 completed on 26. 12.1941.

- (28) the minutes of the report. In practice it was a normal ratio of staff, but also present were Gen. Calvi and the Leut. Col. Ravajoli, who had to report to Bastico. The session ended with a controversy. Rommel had to say: "*the position of Gazala I can defend it until it is circumvented.*" Whereupon the Leut. Col. Ravajoli remarked: "*you know that the enemy has not received new divisions. Now if the bypass is performed by a regiment of armored cars has a relative importance. You, you're a master of military art, taught me that sometimes you just have to resist an hour more to seize the victory*". Replicating Rommel was stinging: "*If we had remained an hour more, today we would all be prisoners. The CAM did not arrive in time to win the battle for Bir el Gobi*". And Ravajoli: "*However, at 08:00 of the 7th you were at the RAM and have given the order to attack at 12:00. Then the Division was in place and has not arrived in delay*". This, indeed, was not exactly, however closed discussion with Rommel a strange: "*but the order had been given already by two days*"
- (29) see above. letter G.S. date 12.12.1941 (annex 26).
- (30) DSCSAS, f. 20984/01/Op. 13 date, 12.1941-annex 28.
- (31) DSCS, tele 56/M 14 date. 12.1941, at 1.
- (32) DSCS, f.s.n. date 14.12.1941- annex 29.
- (33) DSCSAS, tele/20986 0 p. date 13.12.1941, hours 23.55.
- (34) DSCSAS, minutes of the meeting-Annex 30,
- (35) DSCS, tele 58/M date 12.1.2.1941, 13 hours ',
- (36) one could rely simply on a tank company on arrival in Benghazi with the steamer *Ankara* and another waiting in Tripoli with the Col de Montgenèvre,
- (37) The news attributed by Rommel's German aerial reconnaissance about the presence of vehicles 3,000 in Sidi Barrani, according to the testimony of the Chief Information Office of the Comando Superiore, was totally non-existent. It would have meant to hold relevant British forces arriving from the Middle East to push the Italian Command and prove the necessity of withdrawal on Ajdabiya. The Chief Information Office, asked then about the Leut. Col. Montezemolo and Leut, Col, Heggenreiner (German liaison officer), noted as the German intelligence service knew perfectly the alleged unfounded of that report. Withdraw started, in fact, that declared and Rommel, the German air force had fallen into error.
- (38) The minutes of the meeting-Annex 31.
- (39) DSCS, travel diary Cavallero in Libya (December 15-19). See also diary Cavallero, date 17.12.41. .
- (40) It was actually a *JockColumn*, effectively directed towards Bir Tengeder.
- (41) the historical Diary of XXI Corps, the order of the *Panzergruppe* date 17.12.1941, 16 hours.
- (42) the information was evident result of inferences, rather than discovery. In those days, Cunningham's situation was extremely irritating "*because his battleship were forced to immobility due to lack of destroyers for the escort*" (A. CUNNINGHAM, op. Cited above, p. 316)..

- (43) It was operation M. 42, which will be discussed later.
- (44) As mentioned above the *Breconshire* was mistaken for a battleship; but the strange is that the aircraft catapulted from Italian ships and that followed the formation of Vian step by step, *always* showed the presence of a battleship of Vian, Thus tricking Adm. Jachino, superior Commander at sea.
- (45) The action is known as the first battle of Sirte. See in this regard A. COCCHIA, *La difesa del traffico con l'Africa settentrionale dal 1.10.41 ad 30.9.42*, USM, Rome, 1962 p. 196 et seq.
- (46) The minutes of the meeting-Annex 32.
- (47) E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, pp. 96-97.
- (48) The episode was partly attributed to the delay with which the CAM had left for Mechili. In fact the Corps had to start the *Trieste* at, 13:00 to 15:00 for *Ariete* and 16:00 for the rearguards. the 21st *Panzer* however-terminating the *Afriakorps* column-slow to withdraw for reasons not known and all vehicles of CAM were still, stacked, waiting from 13:00 to 16:00. When, at 16:30, the arrived formation of *Stuka*, the head of the CAM was just playing. It should be noted that at 15:45 was passed a formation of *Royal Air Force*, whose bombing had caused very slight damage and a dozen wounded. The *Stuka*, however, made 47 dead, 61 wounded, 17 vehicles destroyed or almost and a score damaged.
- (49) On 23 December the interim command of CAM was taken on by Balotta, later by Gen. De Stefanis (who left the *Trento* to the Gen. Lombardi), then from the Gen. Zingales (31 December).
- (50) J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 410.
- (51) Ibid
- (52) The 22nd Guards Brigade (Gen. J. C.O. Marriott) was formed by 11th Hussars with armored cars, a squadron of 2nd *Royal Gloucestershire Hussards* with fourteen *Stuart*, II *Scots Guards*, III *Coldstream Guards* and 5th campaign artillery.
- (53), DSCSAS f. 09/41 date 22.12.1941 of *Panzergruppe*. That morning on Gen. Osterkamp was in command of the East (Tripolitania Gen. Vecchiarelli) posted by Rommel-to put it to the current situation and give instructions in order to consider as the only possible resistance line that supported the village of Sine and Hon. Whereupon, Bastico wrote immediately to Rommel begging him to ask any communication and request to Comando Superiore, from which depended the XX Corps, and the need to know in a timely fashion, and not one day to the other, his operational intentions.
- (54) DSCSAS, f. 21230/01/0 p. date 23.12.1941.
- (55) The Leut. Col. Montezemolo was returned to Italy with Cavallero on 19 December.
- (56) DSCS, tele 31137/0 p. date 23.12.1941.
- (57) The enemy situation on the evening of December 23, communicated by the Office information of the Comando Superiore at 14:30 on the 24th, shows how thoroughly work the informational organs. Had been caught even the withdrawal of the 7th Arm Div. and replacing it with the 1st Arm. Div. formed by 22nd Brigade already in line and with the 2nd armored brigade.

- (58) J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 412.
- (59) The 22nd armored brigade consisted of: 3rd and 4th *County of London Yeomanry*, 2nd *Royal Gloucestershire Hussards*, IX battalion of the *Rifle Brigade*, 2nd horse artillery (on two bty. of 8 pieces of 25 lbs.), 102nd horse artillery (with three bty. of 6 pieces 12 lbs.) and 122nd anti-aircraft battery.
- (60) The German 88 mm guns of 35th artillery hit the *tanks* from a distance of nearly two kilometers.
- (61) The CAM indicated that it had destroyed 18 tanks and armored cars and 15 other vehicles and captured 59 prisoners, losing a single killed and four wounded.
- (62) In the framework of the measures envisaged, the two Corps were to prepare each order a motor unit can transport a Division in a single solution.
- (63) were assigned the following units: at the X Corps group of 88/55, an engineer company of arrest, a pioneer engineer company and pioneer battalion of the *Sabratha*; XXI Corp I/86th infantry *Sabratha*, a group squadrons *Aosta*, sappers battalion and a company of engineer; to the CAM a motorized machinegun company of P.A.I., a flying battery, an anti-tank grenadier battalion, just arrived from Italy.
- (64) It consisted of three infantry battalions, two companies mortar of 81, two anti-tank companies from 47/32 and two divisional artillery groups.
- (65) The historical Diary of XXI Corps.
- (66) The CAM was reduced to approximately 5,000 men, 71 machine guns, 30 pieces of 75 and 100, 19 M 13 wagons. The Corps had no division services and not they even mufflers to cook the mess.
- (67) J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 419.
- (68) Ibid., p. 421.
- (69) C. AUCHINLECK, Despatch, p. 347.
- (70) J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 422.
- (71) Ibid, p. 427. This period was written by Ritchie.
- (72) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, part IV, vol. I, p. 42.
- (73) Ibid, p. 42-43.
- (74) Ibid., p. 44.
- (75) Ibid, p. 45.
- (76) I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 95.
- (77) C. AUCHINLECK, Despatch, p. 347.
- (78) DSCSAS, tele 4314 date 3.1.1942, 6 hours, by *Sallona* Inf. Div..

- (79) DSCS, tele 30049/0 p. date 17.1.1942.
- (80) DSCS, s. n. letter date 17.1. 1942 of Mar. Kesselring.
- (81) According to the data reported in Rome on 22.1.1942 is presumed present in the Halfaya area 247 officers and 3,572 NCOs and ranks among Italians. From 18 November to 9 January the Italian garrison had lost 155 killed, 367 wounded and 1,994 dispersed (including about 600 between killed and wounded).
- (82) C. AUCHINLECK, Despatch cit., p. 348.
- (83) J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 436.
- (84) DSCS, f. 610/M date 28.12.1941 of :t. Col. Montezemolo. Frankly the not convinced: taking it to the letter, it should be present in Tripoli 550 a good units at a level not lower than the company evidently province or isolated. Without wishing to discuss the statistic, but it would be interesting to analyze in depth.
- (85) The staff of the Division A, S. 42 incorporated: Division command; two infantry regiments with a 81 mm mortar company and three infantry battalions with four companies; an artillery regiment with a group of 88/55, two of 100/17, two and two 75/27 20 mm; a mixed engineer battalion, a. health section and a substance section. Each infantry regiment had 36 A/T pieces. by 20 or 25 and as many as 47/32, 16 light vehicles and 40 heavy. The artillery regiment had 12 88 pieces, 24 to 100, 24 of 75, 16 by 20, and 190 vehicles and tractors.
- (86) The armored cars type 41 had the following features: weight 7 tons. 400 kg.; armament: one mtr. from armored, a Breda 20 cal. 8 in the turret and another in casemate; maximum amour 18 mm turret, side 10 mm 8.5 mm, hull; maximum road speed 75 km h, off the road from 20 to 40 km/ h; Road 400 autonomy km, off the road 15 hours; Radio: an RF3 M appliance.
- (87) The origination of the Mot. Div., A.S. 42. included: Division command, an armored battalion with 47 vehicles, a tank battalion with 52 - 13 M, two infantry regiments, an artillery regiment, a mixed engineer battalion, a health section, a subsistence section and a motor pool.
- (88) The 47/32 Semovente (with L/40 hull) had the following features: weight 6 tons. 500 kg.; 3 men crew; armament: one piece by 47-32 in casemate, 2 machineguns Beretta cal. 9. maximum Armor: 30 mm. Hull, side 15 mm, 6 mm and sky.; maximum speed: 42 km. road/h, astray/h; 20 km. autonomy: 200 km road., 10-hour off-road. No radio. The semovente 47/32 for platoon command had a RF radio device 1AC The command tank for self-propelled unit had a mitr. 8 mm Breda. masquerading as cannon in place of 47/32 piece in casemate. Featured, besides, 2 radio instead of one.
- (89) The Semovente of 75/18 (with M/40 hull) had the following characteristics: weight: 13 ton. 100 kg.; crew: 3 men; armament: one piece from 75/18 in casemate, a Mg. Breda 8 mm.; maximum amour: hull 30 mm, 25 mm, side top 15 mm., bottom 6 mm.; maximum speed: 30 km. Road, off the road 15/hr km/hour; autonomy: 210 km by road, off the road 10 hours; RF radio device Ac 1 The wagon had a mitr command. from 13.2 in Cannon place in casemate and Mg. Breda 8 min. Also had 2 radios instead of one.

- (90) The staff of "Arm.Div. A.S. 42" included: Division command, an armored Car battalion with 47, means a semoventi Battalion with 19 smv. from 47/32, a tank Regiment with three battalions (189 M 13 tanks), a bersaglieri regiment with two bersaglieri battalions and a A/T Battalion three companies of 47/32; an artillery regiment with two groups of 75/27 T.M. and two groups of 75/18 self-propelled (20 semoventi), a group of 105/28 and one of 90/53, a mixed engineer battalion, a medical section, one of livelihoods and a mixed truck pool.
- (91) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 43.
- (92) In this respect it. worth noting that the convoy, consisting of the German steamers *Mantza* and *Procida*, escorted by two Italian torpedo boats, was to sail on 18 November in the afternoon from Piraeus, where under load from the 14th. The departure was postponed a few days because between 18 and 22 other convoys were sent to Libya., and precisely to 23 November, agreed date between Supermarina and German command of the Aegean.
- The information service of 18 R. Marina received this report: "*today 18 November should start from Piraeus the German Ships Maritza and Procida loads of German troops and cargo, including of sand-colored camouflaged armored cars. It is said that these two ships would be directed to Benghazi. It is believed appropriate observes you made in this unit because if indeed the two units are merchant directed to Benghazi, the secret of the Mission has not been at all given by crew members or who was acquainted with this departure for Africa*". The subsequent investigation opened by the German Command landed at concrete conclusions (A. COCCHIA, op. cited, p. 106).
- (93) The U-Boat believed to have sunk a cruiser, therefore they had safe News of the sinking of the battleship only after several months.
- (94) See A. COCCHIA, op. cited above, chap. X; A. Jachino, *Le due Sirti*, Mondadori, Milano, 1963 part I; G. FIORAVANZO, op. cited above, chap. III.
- (95) To keep the secret, Churchill informed the British Parliament only the source 23.4.1942 in a closed-door session.
- (96) Diary Cavallero.

Eleventh chapter

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The events held in Northern Africa from March 1941 until January 1942 carry the imprint of the tank. Not that before the tank had shown only its shadow: the Italian tenth army was crushed by tracks of the *Matilda* and the 7th British Armored Division. However in some ways there was fight. It was immediately clear that appeared in the abrupt return to the clash between the Cataphract Knight and the pawn, it was just delay the dramatic end of the pawn. This without removing the operational concept of the winner would silence the errors of the defeated. At the beginning of 1941, however, arrived in Libya another Cataphract Knight, who joined the pawn and then the debate was sufficiently balanced. As always happens when two formations more or less equivalent face off, breaking the balance was likely to occur in dependence of the predominance acquired by the material one or the other, be it depended on the skill of the master, by a powerful flow of supply or its interruption, or by determining a specific weight means of fight (a certain type of tank, a type of Cannon).

Reconsider the salient stages of operations for an additional review would certainly be superfluous and even boring, after comments made by via. Therefore it is believed to focus on a few aspects of the campaign.

The first of these relates to necessarily to the relations between commanders and Italian and German Commands at a high level. Rommel took the helm of operations with an awesome look for confidence, energy, perception of events and why not?, fortune. Until Tobruk emerged at all; with the siege of the fort began the criticism and especially the friction. The result was the most just use Italian forces use so indifferent to the reality of the situation from aggravating the conditions of our divisions, poor itself. In this regard, however, requires a character order.

In mid-1941, the General staff of the R. Army studied and operated organic tables designed to place large units elementary able to accomplish well their task in Cyrenaica; However the

first events prevented the full implementation of the measures in question, then led away from organic to formations. The *Pavia* and *Bologna* took organization “type A.S.” only for infantry units, but never their full artillery regiment-so much so that at first was awarded the 3rd rapid artillery and the second some border guard groups-they never received the vehicles that justified the motorized status. The *Trento* began the transformation, but soon found himself in a position of the *Pavia* and *Bologna*: incomplete unit fragments ever could compose, need for urgent military needs adjustment; on the other hand, had an extra bersaglieri Regiment. The *Brescia* and *Savona*, geared to take, as soon as possible, the structure of “employment” type, remained with the infantry regiments to homogeneous appearance and without artillery regiment; so the first was clearly giving the 1st fast artillery as sub-unit and the second as the 2nd fast artillery reinforcement. The *Sabratha*, finally, there existed in name only but reduced to two battalions, two companies of 81 mortars and two companies of 47/32, without even a truck.

The transformation work of large unit was always strongly hampered not only by insufficient arrivals from Italy but also from continuing more or less closely with the enemy in a very tactical split device, that it was not possible to change in order to adapt the deployment to take account of the organic nature. Operations, in fact, mandated to establish, in the absence of natural, holds a line of strongpoints with units strongly dug-in, so as to provide a pin the friendly tank units to maneuver and stop opposing ones. This could be accomplished only with appropriate divisions-strength and armament. And indeed it was implemented on the front Sollum -Halfaya-Sidi Omar, on that Tobuk-el Adem, in Ain el-Alam Hamza, Gazala on the Derna-Mechili and finally on the positions of Marsa el Brega-Maaten Giofer. However, in creating such a defensive bastion, the organic constitution of our divisions each, and in particular of those “type A.S.”, always appeared too weak and insufficient unit armament. The cornerstones of the company and battalion in divisional sectors of more than thirty kilometers, the flatness that made the attack of armored vehicles and armored personnel from every direction, the great distances which made each maneuver in hindsight means of

support, everything was always the prior distribution, and with only the criterion of equality of arms of accompanying battalions. As a result the Division "type A.S." just basically dispose *four* battalions filled out by several of the other three chopped up in parts unlikely. Without bridging the shortage of weapons, particularly anti-aircraft, anti-tank and indispensable in an theater that the complete absence of coverage offered at fragmented and unimagined possibilities and plane machine gun attack in which the ground activities are carried out only with the other mechanized units.

To fend off similar state of affairs is provided using all weapons recovered on the battlefield and emptying warehouses. Thus came the creation of centers of fire and strongholds where, in addition to the standard armament, the same infantry used numerous other weapons of every size and type, from gun of 105 to number submachine gun often double or triple than those prescribed. Ultimately, the resulting tactical complex responded well to but from the standpoint of order had nothing to do with organic tables.

Everything Rommel evidently had no responsibility in any way it could to change the situation, but it must be acknowledged that he often employed the Italian divisions with measures that resulted in the formation of complexes of very heterogeneous forces, whose relative efficiency then he unjustly complained. In part, however, the accusations addressed to this or that master or that or sometimes units and its harshness of ways ⁽¹⁾, the result was the worst psychologically gradual sense of superiority that the Germans began to openly manifest against the allies. Gambara was not all wrong when stating that the guilt of failure was always laid by Rommel and his commands and Italian units and, on the other hand, the merit of the victories was almost always limited to the *Afrikakorps*.

In addition, the Corps of Maneuver, i.e. the large unit stronger than they had the Comando Superiore, not offered in that early period of life the performance that he had confided to get. It is also true that the imbalances that emerged did not relate so the fire behavior- *Ariete* had figured on more than one occasion and especially to Bir el Gobi, the *Trieste* was also to rise to the occasion in the fighting around Sidi Rezegh, the recon group had always operated

with vivacity and the *Giovani Fascisti* had batted beautifully at Bir el Gobi-because the direction of the great unity in struggle, also due to insufficient transmission system. However the *Ariete* with his tanks of 13 tons. He could not compete with the *cruisers* or confront the Pzkw III and IV (the melancholy musings we bestow on this subject from Ritchie we dwell on); neither the motorized riflemen were able to compete with the infantry mounted on half-tracks or appropriate means to the desert. And the *Trieste*, although better ordered than other divisions, was not in happier conditions to hold the fight under a command to the qualification of "motorized" so very different from ours. No wonder, therefore, if this name often poses serious division in embarrassment in front of tasks which exceed his chances. Lets also say, for objectivity, which during *Crusader* the two divisions appeared righteous men in the right place. Nor Gambara. Did not drawback nor energy nor capacity, but obvious personal reasons released on his application at the bottom of the CAM, so that his presence did not have the necessary strength and it was felt that occasionally by subordinates. From initial satisfaction of buoyancy as limited, the CAM suffered reductions that inevitably reflected on its functionality. Furthermore, Gambara, just returned to the tasks of head of the G. S. Comando Superiore We wanted to enhance the tactical Command and that he sacked under the command of CAM ⁽²⁾ and by proposing, as a worthy conclusion, dissolution. Furthermore, the battalion initial Engineering Corps was switched to a single 350 radio for connections with large complex and two RF3C units for connection with the employed divisions; means that needed at least an hour for the plant and for the non-stop and that continuous movement became almost unusable. Support units, then nothing more remains-at the time of the deployment to Gazala: no more recon grouping, no services. To now note vehicle deficiencies were all too often an logistics organization insufficiently elastic behind or perhaps not at all elastic. The Gen. Zingales, arrived at the end of December, a report indicated that generally in all units, but especially in the field of repairs, "it was confirmed the blackest bureaucracy, perhaps because they want to justify a plethora of staff employed in offices, warehouses, etc." ⁽³⁾.

Broadly speaking, therefore, it can be understandable dissatisfaction of Rommel. Far less is his frequent lack of tact; gift among Allies has a sensitive weight. Since he was in retreat from Tobruk that certain behaviors appeared more noticeable, it is reported that he had to write to Leut. Col. Montezemolo in Rome, when the *Panzergruppe* was still in Ajdabiya:

“A collection of comments I note that, in addition to the fatigue and depression resulting from the offset, it is manifested:

- in our troops a sense of bitterness at seeing forced into walking long marches and abandon artillery and materials, while Allied troops relatively much more rich in vehicles (12,000 against our 7,000), not only moved exclusively motorized but they could carry their materials and every kind of hindrance;

- in Allied troops unrestrained the natural arrogance, being quite loose, during the abandonment of the territory, the brakes of the discipline and respect the order and property.

In that regard, I think it can be interesting to know the following points of a report of Leut. Col. Heggenreiner to Gen. Rintelen, relationship that seems to be transmitted to the OKW and the compiler gave me private and personal vision:

- German soldiers and NCOs are abandoned in the rear areas to maltreatment towards private property, lack of deference to police, sentries, officials and Italian Commands, so severely detrimental to the good name of German troops and Allied relations; attaches Leut. Col. Heggenreiner this behavior habits acquired in occupied countries and complain that officers have not been able to instill here a different conception in troops;

- the Gen. Gause has tired and fed up; complaining that the climate was not suited and seems to tend to prepare a return to current operating cycle is complete;

- the Gen. Cruewell, courteous and chivalrous, enjoys the widest and unconditional sympathy not only from German troops, but also by Italian troops and commands (this relief, very marked, contrasts, in the report, a complete silence about Gen. Rommel”⁽⁴⁾.

Considered the picture displayed will not be evil, even anticipating the times, reporting an excerpt of wiretap recorded January 28, between the Germany Embassy in Rome and the OKW in Berlin. In that venue von Rintelen had this to say: *I was down [in Libya]... I have also spoken with Rommel. The initiative was his, so your merit is all his. I have been using some reconnaissance columns. Rommel expressed his admiration for the pushed aggressively and attack demonstrated by Italian units once the retreat.*”⁽⁵⁾.

The disagreement was evident between Gambara and Rommel. Already in December Cavallero tried to find a *modus vivendi*, then ended up imposing himself, but realized that the mood of the main commanders remained unpleasantly ill-placed, to the point that, in mid-January when Montezemolo wrote him back on the subject, he began to think of a radical solution.

“The Gen. Gambara-exhibited his sent-you are given with passion and great activity to the reorganization of the G.U. According to the plans already communicated to this C.S. But to intimate does not hide his intention, or rather his desire, to leave early that theater for other assignments. This gives a dinner party forward to meet his destiny, and I think that also for this purpose has now telegraphed to Rome, demanding that I return to report (...)”⁽⁶⁾.

Had some uncertainties. The 17 January Cavallero received on Gen. Scuero, under-Secretary for war, and speaking of the decision to carry out an exchange of positions between Gen. Roatta (head of the G.S. of the R. Army) and Gen. Vittorio Ambrosio (Commander of the 2nd Army, in Croatia)⁽⁷⁾, also hinted at the possibility of calling to Italy, Gambara assumptions against which, however, was a "matter of prestige in the face of the enemy". Immediately after Montezemolo welcomed, just returned from Libya, and on the basis of these reports, noted: “*Situation Gambara-Rommel rather tense. Troops have feeling quarrel between the two commands (not between two people). Various currents about opinions on the recent retreat. At my request, about the possibility to correct the conflict, Leut. Col. Montezemolo said that a withdrawal of etc. Gambara would not feel that a measure to eliminate the conflict*”⁽⁸⁾. The thing seemed to stay there and Cavallero moved to examine the replacement of the Commander and the Deputy Commander of *Ariete*. But in the evening he had a new interview with Mussolini, who obviously did not felt the theme of prestige in the face of the enemy. They get the gist of the conversation from notes about a phone call made by the head of the G. S. General at Scuero the following day at 10:45: “*Duce decided that Ecc. Gambara falls (...). Future replacement of problem Ecc. Basnco. Possible sending Ecc. Rosi and then problem of replacing these*”⁽⁹⁾.

On January 19 Cavallero called Roatta for “examination of names to be proposed for various high positions in A.S.I.” and was to emerge the Gambara's replacement in the person of Gen. Curio Barbasetti di Prun⁽¹⁰⁾. But at this point there arose an unexpected stop. Had arrived the

news that Hitler had awarded a high decoration to Rommel: "*consequent opportunity to not move General Gambara at the moment. Telegram Ecc. Bastico that exalts the Gambara-Rommel*" noted Cavallero. 22 January and sailed for Tripoli accompanied by von Rintelen and Montezemolo.

The other important aspect of operations was the action of Rommel's command during the battle of Marmarica, including the first battle of Sidi Rezegh, the incursion by the British until the rear edge, the second battle of Sidi Rezegh, the abandonment of Tobruk. The 2 December Cavallero received a letter of Gambara:

"At the end of the fifth day, after the successful transfer of full powers to Rommel-accepted in a spirit of discipline and love of country was as follows: the operating Corps split up. The *Ariete* [recite: the *Afrikakorps*]-15th and 21st from German illusory assumption that the enemy now in the central area were annihilated-departed in a East direction is leaving poor weak forces around Tobruk. Rommel is the result of leaving his divisions without directives. For five whole days few forces in the sector of Tobruk, strengthened to better with elements flowing from the rear, contained and repelled the enemy with teeth, which strongly pushed by Tobruk and Rezegh. On the fifth day, Rommel, finally informed of what was happening here, He commanded three divisions return westward and himself, miraculously escaped to the British, was able to return to the command. Two other days have passed to get the connection with the divisions marching West. Yesterday above all, clarified finally the situation, Rommel himself gave provisions to individual divisions to eliminate worrying about the enemy mass at Rezegh. Today it is thus obtained employment in a position between important Rezegh and Tobruk (Belhamed). I am not arguing it critically. I know only that the command continues to tear on the basis of views and judge situations in close range on the same battlefield. It looks or the one or the other enemy grouping which, given the terrain, typically manages to escape and lose so having regard to the general situation. To date, three quarters of the German armored Corps Command is in the hands of the enemy. Rommel's Command post, ditto. The command of the 21st *Panzer* ditto. The Corps of Maneuver split works to tearing and pieces for orders directly emanating from Rommel, without connection, without unity of action, regardless of the supply line. Everything will be fine also provided hitherto the enemy has shown more beast than we do. However I believe there is an urgent need to order that the Comando Superiore has again hold of the motorized Corp, in order to be able to seize the good opportunity to strike the decisive blow or at worst can fend off any new shocks that could affect the situation very seriously.

It appears that the enemy is tired, but also that its commands to persist in offensive action and that many new means are organizing and starting on the front (...)" ⁽¹¹⁾.

Undeniably the synthesized from Gambara corresponded to the substantive truth of the facts, mood controversy aside. Also is unquestionable a number of “errors” of Rommel, who of course at that time, not the best. Some of these “errors” have valid mitigating, others do not.

Rommel self convinced of imminent *Crusader* and not such a mental attitude – absolutely honest, because otherwise you wouldn't spent two weeks in Rome led to a hasty rehash of the device that was assembling for the attack on Tobruk; though basically had planned the assumptions and reflected on how to deal with them. The delay to realize (or accept) that the British offensive was truly underway; but it could very well be a preliminary move to find German parade and his inactivity disoriented Cunningham.

He destroyed the bulk of enemy armored forces and jumped to the precipice in the direction of the border for what turned out to be an empty battle, spreading along the way the *Afrikakorps* and the *Ariete*; but the havoc caused in the ranks of the 8th Army was such that Cunningham said to the offensive failed. He was accused of having neglected depots of British materials, whose deployment was largely known from Axis intelligence and actually he did not stop the attention on those precious logistics centers. *"I've never heard Rommel-wrote von Mellenthin-expressions of interest for the supply centers of the 8th Army. Knowing their location through captured documents, but the intent of Rommel was not to attack the British supplies, but to destroy their army. So his plan was to cut off the retreat of 30 Corp and throw the 4th Indian Division on the minefields of Sollum "*

⁽¹²⁾. Anyway it seems exaggerated the claim that *"the catch, i.e. the destruction of two depots [the F.M.C. 50 South of Gasr el-Abd] period, which would be the annihilation of the British divisions"* ⁽¹³⁾. The Field Maintenance Centers were several and each needed a share of troops: to over twenty kilometers south of Trigh el Abd there were 6 centers, 63 and 65; Southeast of Gasr el-Abd the 50. Others were ready to enter leapfrog feature or a new Constitution. So even if one or two of them were destroyed or captured, no doubt it would have derived great advantage to the *Afrikakorps* but not excessive harm to the 8th Army (the damage would be indirect: the oxygen received by

the *Panzerdivisionen*). Even von Mellenthin was skeptical: "*In any case, I have doubts that the destruction of some logistic center would bring the British offensive at the end. The British excelled in organization of supplies and their resources were limitless*". ⁽¹⁴⁾.

Rommel employed his divisions without savings, wear out and break up in battle groups; but in a series of fighting during which the news on the enemy were vague, outdated or incorrect and evolving events, became virtually inevitable attrition; in fact even the opponent suffered heavily. And as for the splitting of the units, usually suggested by the circumstances or was imposed by the need to deal with a higher offense coming from multiple directions.

So far, therefore, do not appear as less decisive the «errors» Where the speech changes is in examining the conduct of battle. It can be argued that for several days he held in his hand not Rommel steadfast the reins of the battle, which oversaw the mass use of mobile troops, who trusted in their insight too. Who actually replaced him, at least in the tactical field (but we know that Rommel invaded even that), was Crüwell. The first battle of Sidi Rezegh is ascribed to all its merit. In that Rommel was lucky he was unlucky, but when alongside Cunningham noticed Auchinleck. If they hadn't appeared on the scene, most likely *Crusader* would end ingloriously in a few days from its inception. And if Auchinleck had personally directed the 8th Army, quantitative superiority would close the British game with *Panzegruppe* South-East of Tobruk or, at most, to Gazala.

As for the withdrawal, he said of the new grounds of contrast between Bastico, Gambara and Rommel. Please note that the retreat across the Cyrenaica wasn't considered lightly by anyone. On 20 December the Gen. von Waldau noted on his diary: "*Rommel decided in favor of a further retreat, precisely to Ajdabiya. Unable to judge whether he is right or wrong. We are losing a lot of material, especially transport aircraft (...)*" ⁽¹⁵⁾. And the Gen. Veith, Commander of the 90th Light, on the same day his staff remarked: "*does anyone know a way out. The British there are vastly superior in number. The mystery is why follow us with such slowness. Over and over we have given way to escape the encirclement. There is only one explanation have a sacrosanct*

fear of General Rommel and of the ability to act with surprise. Here's the reason why we on your heels with so much hesitation " ⁽¹⁶⁾.

Almost all contact with General Rommel had deemed excessive in its constant concern of a possible short rope winding along the pre-*gebelica* or even further South. That worry led to sudden decisions, but in truth does not seem serious blame a similar mood, as long as anyone in his place would have feared to do the end of Gen. Tellera As. And managed to save all infantry divisions, where not everyone probably would have been capable of. On balance, when the *Panzergruppe* reached the positions of Marsa el-Brega could count on a little breath. Ritchie had at hand the full result, but opportunities were faded.

The success was the British; was achieved with persistence a little confusing from an increasingly exhausted opponent. "*Operation Crusader*-commented a British party-witness was, without any doubt, an important success. However, nobody could say that it was a battle or a series of satisfactory battles" ⁽¹⁷⁾.

CHAPTER 11 NOTES

- (1) In its notice, the Publisher of Panzer Battles recalls that when he asked von Mellenthin his impressions on the interpretation of James Mason in the film *The Desert Fox*, he replied after a moment of silence: "Absolutely too courteous" (op. cited, p. 54).
- (2) The officers of the command of CAM were reduced to little more than a third, the means Quancier Generale was absorbed by the Comando Superiore, who took ten trucks equipped of the Corps.
- (3) Considerations and teachings from the operating cycle played by CAM in the battles of Marmarica and Cyrenaica, date 9.3.1942.
- (4) DSCS, f. 609/M date 28.12.1941 of Leut. Col. Montezemolo. Add the following comment on Gen. Giglioli, Intending at that time: "*relations between soldiers of both armies have never resulted in serious incidents, but there was camaraderie. The most tragic day of the retreat there were by commands and the German troops clear signs of absolute selfishness in our concerns (...). Considerable indiscipline has been noticed in German, responsible drivers most of road accidents and intolerant of our traffic limitations and our traffic police checks, sometimes had to use their tanks to make them reasonable.* (report by Gen. Giglioli, f.SC/1025 date 16.4.1943).
- (5) Diary Cavallero.
- (6) *ibid.*, personal letter No. 641/M dated 13.1.1942.
- (7) The exchange of appointment, which took place under the date of January 20, was unexpected for all including Roatta, who accused the coup. Cavallero, in dismissing him, he claimed to be measure attributable in part due to certain delays in working staff R. Army, but essentially the opportunity to assume command of a large complex units, being not far from appointment to Corps Commander. In fact, he two seem to have been the underlying reasons: certain independence manifested towards the Comando Supremo (and therefore of Cavallero) and an observant analysis made by Roatta on the difficult situation in Croatia, where he deployed the 2nd army. See G. ZANUSSI, *Guerra e catastrofe d'Italia*, Rome Italy, 1945, vol. I, p. 181 & seq.
- (8) Diary Cavallero, date 18.1.1942.
- (9) See footnote 16. The January 20 on Gen. Barbasetti was summoned on 11.25 by Cavallero, who informed him of his candidacy to take over the post of head of G. S. Comando Superiore N. A. and brief him on the situation from the Operations Unit Chief, Gen. Fassi.
- (10) *Ibid.*
- (11) UGO CAVALLERO, *Comando Supremo*, Cappelli, Bologna, 1948, pp. 156-157. *The diary records the original date Cavallero of 2.12.1941 the following note: 20:00 hours. I get precisely Ecc. Gambara command situation assessment on Rommel (see Encl. 1 ter)*». The annex has not been traced.
- (12)) F. VON MELLENTHIN, op. cited above, p. 89.
- (13) H.G. VON ESEBECK, op. cited above, p. 68.

- (14) F. VON MELLENIHIN, cited above, p. 89.
- (15) D. IRVING, cited above, p. 164-164 ~
- (16) Ibid.
- (17) M. CARVER, cited above, p. 183.

Appendixes

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GERMAN CORP IN AFRICA
OPERATIONS SECTION

N. 60/3-41

Q.G. 17 MARCH 1941

Secret

*To the General Staff of High supreme command of the Army
Operations section 3,5160/41 classified*

Most secret! Officers only

APPRAISAL OF THE POSSIBILITIES FOR AN ATTACK OPERATION IN NORTH AFRICA.

1)- *Approximate enemy situation.*

The mass of the English army intended for the defense of Egypt is currently operating in Cyrenaica (approximately 5 divisions, comprised the armored). Behind they are found, until the delta of the included Nile, approximately 7 divisions, and still 5 divisions at the Suez Canal.

An essential thing is to reinforce the army that is in the Africa North, in case of a German surprise attack, it will be as soon as possible, because the great forces currently existing in the eastern Mediterranean and in the north east of Africa, especially fleet and aviation, would have to be still engaged for next the two months for the action in Italian East Africa and for the alignment that is gone delineating against Syria. Therefore a such aid would have, as a result of a rapid German-Italian success, to come too much late.

The English intentions of an attack against Tripoli, are in this situation temporarily improbable. But English will make of all in order holding the territory conquered in Cirenaica for the protection of Egypt, waves to prevent to the threat of the constitution of Italian-Germans air force bases. Moreover he will strain himself to soon finish victoriously the action against the A.O.I in order to free for other future employment the troops engaged currently there: perhaps against Tripoli or in order to reinforce the defense against a waited for attack German-Italian. A delay of this attack can be desirable for English in theirs puts into effect them situation.

The tempo, that for this theater of operations currently works for Italy, turns aside to favor of English in this moment in which the Italian-Germans forces will be able to hold the front to a possible for how much unlikely an English attack.

It is also possible, and it would correspond to their mentality, the English, for lack of other forces, launch the troops of De Gaulle in one fast episode through the desert regions of the south of the Libya. The happened one of a similar enterprise could bring remarkable disturbs for the attack towards east, for how much for the action on Tripoli cannot be decisive. However it could render necessary for certain tempo, the employment of the German air weapon.

In the south there is no possibility of operations for great forces, also considering the unfriendly attitude sympathize for De Gaulle in the Algerian south and the Libyan south.

2) - *Moment for an attack.*

The attack towards east must therefore be made soon, to latest before the great summer heats comes. Therefore for the conduct of all the operations only the May month remains available. And necessary therefore that every preparation is concluded for the end of April.

3) - *Scope of attack.*

The scope of an attack operation can be only the heart of Egypt (Alexandria - Cairo - Suez Canal). The limitation to retake of the Pirenaica means only retaking of territory.

The full employment of all the troops that are in Libya and of the Italian troops of reinforcement that they will come from Italy must be guaranteed; from the Italian Comando Superiore it must moreover be assured that, in the spirit of all the war conduct, at least the Italian quick divisions, the Italian air weapon and Italian Navy the war for the continuation of the offensive towards Egypt come put to disposition. On the conduct of all the operations of attack towards east, to the C.T.A. must be granted a wide influence in order to guarantee the unit of the action.

The entire operation must be uniform in two parts: to strike the English army in Cyrenaica and breach onto Cairo.

For the continuation of the offensive operation towards Egypt the annihilation of the English Armed Forces in Cirenaica is premised the definitive express. Because this scope is obtained must for means of aviation from the Sicily and from Greece, like also for means of the full employment of the Italian Navy, rejecting the English fleet in the eastern Mediterranean therefore that the maritime way for the transport of the supplies prepared in Italy (Naples) to Benghazi and Tobruk is assured with the beginning of the operations in Cyrenaica. If as succeeding exploitation of the first one, could be carried out a quick thrust with weak forces towards Egypt, will turn out from the development of the situation.

4) - *Situation of the forces in Libya.*

English forces are in Cyrenaica with the mass close to the coast and supported on the course of in the coastal, in zone Agedabia - Derna the English armored corp. and the Australian Corp, the English armored Corps have 3 armored units, 6 armored regiments of exploratory, 2 mot. bns. and 6-9 groups of artillery. The Australian Corps has 3 divisions each with 9 bns. and each with approximately 6 groups of artillery.

The military efficiency of these forces, especially for the requirements of the desert, must be indicated as good, the losses suffered and the received substitutions are not specifically. Before this the German command has, given the current equipment of units assigned to the attack, only the German troops 5th Light division and the 15th armored division, with four armored groups, 1 armored exploring unit, 7 mot. bns. and groups of artillery. This is roughly equivalent forces of the English armored Corp. Of the Italian forces they are in issue in the first place for the mobile conduct of the attack 3 mot. divisions (of which one armored division). Three other divisions walk should follow swiftly is by means of temporary or drive to forced marches. About roughly the strength of the units see 1 and 2 annexes.

5) - *Time of the conduct of the attack.*

The command therefore also is forced to strike the enemy divisions soon one after the other taking advantage of the English alignment currently much extending, in conformity of the conditions puts into effect.

It moreover must keep in mind who after the arrival of the news of an attack, is from expecting the influx of new forces from Egypt. In any case it must be avoided that these forces can take part before that the army of the Cirenaica definitively is struck. In order to hit quickly in special way in the war in the desert, they are less necessary numerous forces that not the modern arms, of special moral effectiveness, still not known in the desert. Close to the air forces and parachutists troops, they promise here to the maximum succeeded in front line the tanks, groups of onslaught artillery, fog launchers and also in relation to the supremacy of artillery of English possibly numerous bores from 150. Moreover for a fast conduct of the combat in the desert, special independent units of exploratory armor are necessary, places to great distances, the orders of chosen commanders. The mass in the desert is difficult to lead and to support. To the contrary it is with the distribution of the name modern arms that can be brought back success also against superior forces.

6) - *Line of collision of the attack.*

The main direction of attack on Tobruk is through the deployment of the British, as well as through an obligation given to keep manufacturing jobs in the desert with water as a basis for the continuation of any combat. The region of Derna and Bardia is like water, the best and the richest, so that even massed forces can be procured. Here are also the first usable airfields for the over flight of the desert. Tobruk is besides the main port of procurement and supply of the English.

7) - *Conduct of the attack.*

The conduct of the attack must hold account that in the first place the advanced field of English between Agheila and Agedabia must enter in our possession. Moreover it is from meaning, after the employment of sufficient forces, the possibly unexpected conquest of the advanced English places of safety of Marsa Brega and therefore to push ahead the defense of the narrows of es Segira.

If the enemy accepts the attack may be possible that he deploy his forces according to the way of fighting so far practiced by him; It circles the frontal assault as a means of containing one of the enemy and try to meet with the mass of his tanks. It is also possible that it intends to put its tanks just to defend. Against this possibility is the extension of the desert, so you can expect an attack from any direction. In each case the enemy must from entire armored divisions be attacked and destroyed, before he can think about a continuation of the fight with wide-ranging operations towards Tobruk. Without the previous destruction of the armored corp.,

that is if the British will avoid the fight at Ajdabiya and withdraw the Australian corp. Regardless of this, always at the beginning of the action on small but powerful Ajdabiya units, if any, of the paratroopers should be launched on the coast in direction of Tobruk, to take possession quickly of the port of Tobruk, for the barrier of the coast in both directions and the conquest of important airfields (p.es. Adem).

The battle on Ajdabiya must be conducted with unprecedented energy and speed: 1st to grab the British Armored Corps; 2nd to test even in the desert, from the beginning of operations, the preponderance of existing weapons.

In the event of a decision at Ajdabiya, the action enters the second stage of development. A front with a mass of scattered along the coastal forces, does not promise no quick and decisive success and it may be that the English from the beginning will launch in combat the Australian corp. A quick decision in Cyrenaica, can only be achieved by taking a march day and night through the desert to the South of gebel el Achdar, through the area of Derna, with the intention of impeding the withdrawal of the English and with a quick settlement westward, annihilate the Anglo-Australian forces before they can retreat to the Southeast or aboard steamships. The cover of the march next northward of Ajdabiya and East towards the extant British forces or of possible counterattacks Australian corp., as well as the cover of the backline on the coast road towards Egypt, must be guaranteed with units ".

8)-Aviation.

About the operations of airpower, following a special report. Appropriate, rapid safety of airfields on the coast in Tobruk-Derna area is, with regard to the future, of decisive importance especially for the *Stuka*.

9) - Supplies (see annex 3).

With respect to supplies in the desert, especially the water issue to resolve soon. Especially should be spared a long desert combat against an enemy that can have a supply base and special safe water places. The desert, with massed forces, with a rapid violent march can be won; you can fight, with these units, only in farmlands.

for the Commander of the German Africa Corps
The Chief of staff,
 VON DEM BORNE

The following document is the translation of the original German text by the same command of the C. T.A. and posted to Comando Superiore knowledge in Italian A.S. It was therefore reproduced in its entirety in it's linguistically somewhat approximate.
 The annexes have been omitted.

ITALIAN ORDER OF BATTLE OF THE ARMED FORCES IN N.A.
ON 1ST APRIL 1941

COMANDO SUPERIORE FF.AA. N.A.

Supreme Commander: Gen. Italo Gariboldi

Chief of general staff: Gen. Alighiero Miele

General Staff

Quartermaster General

COMANDO SUPERIORE ROYAL CARABINIERI

Commander: Col. Raffaele Castriota (*interim*)

COMANDO SUPERIORE ARTILLERY

Commander: Gen. Cesare Benelli

5th artillery grouping

6th regiment army corps artillery army

2nd mobile antiaircraft regiment

2nd regiment quick artillery (of the *Pavia* Inf. Div.)

I group 20 milimeter A.A. of the MVSN

COMANDO SUPERIORE ENGINEERS

Commander: Gen. Luigi Grosso

I special grouping engineers with:

II battalion handicraftsmen

II battalion handicraftsmen miners

Sappers battalion

water battalion

special battalion

II special grouping engineers with:

connections battalion of the Comando Superiore

IV battalion connections

VII battalion connections

XI battalion connections

LXV battalion connections

I working companies grouping with:

V working battalion

VII working battalion

VIII working battalion

II working companies grouping with:

I working battalion

II working battalion

III working battalion

IV working battalion

Special Truck battalion engineers

INTENDANCY N A.

Intendente f.f.: Gen. Giuseppe Giordano

General Staff

General Barracks

Director of Sanitary (Col. Med. Igino Foni):

- a special warehouse health and veterinary
- a depot unit health
- thirteen field hospitals
- two military hospitals of reservoir
- two subsidiary military hospitals
- a surgical section
- a x-ray station
- one chemical decontamination section
- one biological decontamination section
- one ambulance section

Director of Commissariat (Col. comm. Vito Ceccarelli):

- a special warehouse provisions and oats
- a special warehouse F.P L.
- one special warehouse V.E.
- between fractions special warehouse V A.F.P L.
- one field bakery section with Weiss furnaces
- one field bakery section without furnaces
- one supply section of armed

Director of Artillery (col. Gino Reghini):

- a special warehouse of artillery
- a chemical material special warehouse
- a laboratory of artillery
- ten ammunitions depots

Director of the Engineers (Col. Pietro Poli):

- a special warehouse independent engineers
- two units engineers
- a personal warehouse specialized for aircraft repair

Director Transports (Lt. Col. Giuseppe Cittadini):

- two truck battalions of maneuver
- a road attendance nucleus
- a military loading and unloading office

Director motor service (col. aut. Aldo Mascarini):

- a warehouse replacement parts
- a laboratory of repairs
- a motor pool
- a main warehouse cel.
- two distribution points cel.
- five common fuels depots

Direction of Administration (Lt. Col. Adm. Umberto Bagnani)

Director of the Stages (Maj. Pietro Berardo):
six communication area commands
five material collection centers of recovery
a concentration camp prisoners of war

Director post office (Cap Guglielmo De Agostini):
two concentration port offices
fourteen post offices

Director Horse and Veterinary (Cap vet. Michele Trotta)
Lumber Office (Guido Felici):
two nuclei forest police
seven detachments of forest police

Services of garrison:
54th regiment T.M.
225th battalion T.M.
226th battalion T.M.

ARIETE Armored DIVISION. (132nd) (Gen. Ettore Baldassarre) with:
General Staff
General Barracks
8th bersaglieres regiment
32nd infantry tank regiment
132nd artillery regiment
132nd mixed engineers company
I/39th infantry of the D.f. Bologna (reinforced.)
I/24th army corps artillery (reinforced.)
Services

TRENTO MOT. DIVISION (102nd) (gen. Luigi Nuvoloni) with:
General Staff
General Barracks
61st infantry regiment
62nd infantry regiment
7th bersaglieres regiment
61st machine-gun battalion
46th regiment artillery
LI mixed-formation engineer battalion
three companies guns from 47/32
services

CAR GROUPING OF THE ARMED FORCES HIGH COMMAND (Col. Tullio Nicolardi) with:
VIII heavy truck battalion
IX heavy truck battalion
I auto repair *caterpillar*
workshop
commissariat street movement
independent unit tank

X ARMY CORPS (Gen. Albeno Barbieri) with:

PAVIA Inf. DIVISION (17th) (Gen. Pietro Zaglio) with:

- General Staff
- General Barracks
- 27th infantry regiment (-)
- 28th infantry regiment (-)
- three companies guns from 47/32
- 3rd regiment quick artillery
- 2nd regiment quick artillery (reinf.)
- V light tank battalion (reinf.)
- II/24th grouping artillery army corps (reinf.)
- XLII group from 75/48 Skoda (reinf.)
- XVII battalion complements (to the town-walls of Tripoli)
- XVII mixed-formation engineer battalion.
- services

BOLOGNA Inf. DIVISION (25th) (gen. Mario Marghinotti) with:

- General Staff
- General Barracks
- 39th infantry regiment (-)
- 40th infantry regiment (-)
- three companies guns from 47/32
- IV light tank battalion (reinf.)
- 205 or regiment artillery
- XXV battalion complements
- XXV mixed-formation engineer battalion.
- services

BRESCLA Inf. DIVISION (27th) (Gen. Banolo Zambon) with:

- General Staff
- General Barracks
- 19th infantry regiment
- 20th infantry regiment
- three companies guns from 47/32
- 1st regiment quick artillery
- XV/16th army corps artillery (reinf.) (to the town-walls of Tripoli)
- XXVII battalion complements
- XXVII mixed-formation engineer battalion

TROOPS and SERVICES OF ARMY CORPS:

- 16th infantry regiment *Savona* (reinf.)
- IV light tank battalion (of the *Bologna* Inf. Div.)
- V light tank battalion (of the *Pavia* Inf. Div.)
- XVIII Libyan battalion.
- XXXVI Libyan battalion
- 16th grouping army corps artillery
- 24th grouping army corps artillery

- I/10th *Sabratha* artillery (reinf.)
- XIV/2nd artillery a.a. (reinf.)
- XLIII/2nd artillery a.a. (reinf.)
- X battalion connections
- 124th wirelesses operator company (reinf.)
- twelve field hospitals

XX ARMY CORPS (Gen. Carlo Spatocco) with:
Sector GARIAN-NALUT (Gen. Pietro Maggiani with):

SAVONA Inf. DIVISION (55th) (Gen. Pietro Maggiani) with:
General Staff
General Barracks
15th infantry regiment
16th infantry regiment (-)
12th regiment artillery
LV battalion complements (to the town-walls of Tripoli)
LV mixed-formation engineer battalion.
services

Sector OF COPERTURA NALUT with:
XXIX Sector frontier guard
290th artillery grouping
IV squadron (spahis)
four Libyan companies mtr. from position
unit mixed engineers

Sector OF COPERTURA DELLA GHIBLA with:
XXXII Libyan battalion
three Libyan companies mtr. from position
one company guns from 47/32
one battery from 77/28
two irregular bands

Sector ZUARA (col. Mario De Meo) with:
SETTORE OF COVER OF ZUARA with:
XXVIII sector frontier guard
38th artillery grouping
four Libyan mitr. companies from position
a grouping Libyan cavalry

COASTAL DEFENSE:
Coastal subsector Zavia
coastal Subsector Zuara

Sector HOMES (Gen. Guido Della Bona) with:

DETACHMENT *SABRATHA* INF. DIVISION (gen. Guido Della Bona):

- General Staff
- General Barracks
- regiment in formation *Sabratha*
- XVII battalion mtr. *Pavia*
- XXV battalion mtr. *Bologna*
- LV battalion mtr. *Sabratha*
- two companies guns from 47/32,
- elements 10th regiment bersaglieres
- artillery grouping
- LX mixed- engineer battalion
- services

GARRISON OF BENI ULID with:

- XXXV Libyan COASTAL battalion

COASTAL DEFENSE:

- coastal subsector Homs
- coastal subsector Zliten
- coastal subsector Misurata

Fortified Citadel of TRIPOLI:

COASTAL SECTOR WEST with:

- XXXIII sector frontier guard with:
- 330th artillery grouping
- mixed engineer nucleus
- XVII battalion complements *Pavia* (reinf.)

SECTOR CENTRAL with:

- XXXIV Sector frontier guard with:
- 340th artillery grouping
- XXVII battalion complements *Brescia* (reinf.)
- II/28th infantry *Pavia* (reinf.)
- XXXV field guard to the frontier with:
- 350th artillery grouping
- II/27th infantry *Pavia* (reinf.)

SECTOR ALAUNA with:

- II/39th infantry *Bologna* (reinf.)
- III/19th infantry *Brescia* (reinf.)
- LV battalion complements *Savona* (reinf.)
- IV squadron mtr. *Genova Cavalleria*
- a artillery battalion in formation

COASTAL SECTOR EAST with:

- I/40th infantry *Bologna* (reinf.)
- VI squadron mtr.. *Aosta*
- 5th artillery grouping of the Army
- VII/35th artillery grouping g.a.f.
- CCCLII artillery battalion g.a.f..

Fortress of TRIPOLI (Gen. Edoardo Quarra):

- II/16th infantry *Savona* (rinf.)
- Fortress* battalion complements
- I battalion CC.NN.
- I battalion CC.NN. Coastal
- V battalion CC.NN.
- VI battalion CC. NN.
- 30th coastal artillery grouping and a.a.
- XIX group from 149/35
- XXI group from 149/35
- two Libyan companies mtr. from position

Libyan Sahara Command (Col. Umbeno Piatti dal Pozzo):

Sector HON with:

- XXXVIII Libyan battalion one company guns from 47/32
- three Libyan companies mtr. from position
- two Saharan companies (in formation.)
- two batteries from 77/28 g.a.f..
- a irregular group "
- one mixed engineers company

Sector UBARI-SERDELES-GHAT with:

- three Libyan companies mtr. from position
- two *meharisti* companies
- a camel group *Tuaregh*

Sector MURZUK with:

- two Libyan companies mtr. from position
- two Saharan companies
- two batteries from 77/28 g.a.f.
- one *meharisti* company

Sector ZELLA with:

- one Libyan company
- one Saharan company
- one battery from 75/27

TROOPS and SERVICES OF ARMY CORPS:

- XX special artery battalion
- XX battalion connections
- thirteen field hospitals
- three glaciological surgical sections
- one section reclamation
- one biological decontamination section
- one chemical company.
- one supply section
- one field bakery section with Weiss furnaces

ORDER OF BATTLE OF THE 5th AVIATION FLEET ON 10 APRIL 1941

Area	Command & Unit	Aircraft		Location	Crews Trained		Note
		Type	battle ready.		Daytime Flight	Nighttime Flight	
Command 5 th Air Fleet, at Tripoli	Flight unit 5th AF. 175 th Squadr. R.S.T.	S.79	1	Mellaha	1	1	1 <i>Ghibli</i> only efficient aircraft
		Ghibli	2	Mellaha	3	3	
		S.79, Cant.	4 1	Castel Benito Misurata	6 1	3 1	
		Z.1007					
13 th Divisone «Pegaso» at Misurata Tactical Command, at Sine	96 th Dive Bomber Group 98 th Bomber Group 53 rd Bomber Group 54 th Bomber Group	Ju.87	10	Misurata	12	0	
		Br.20	11	Bir Bufan	11	11	
		S.79	4	Taurorga	12	10	
		S. 79	4	Misurata	9	5	
14 th Brigade «Rex», at Tripoli	2 nd Ftr. Group 155 th Ftr. Group 18 th Ftr. Group 151 st Ftr. Group	G.50	35	Castel Benito	28	0	
		G.50	27	Misurata e Sorman	33	0	
		Cr. 42	2	Misurata	2	0	
		Cr. 42	28	Hon, Tauorga e Tamet	27	8	
		CR. 42	31	Sorman e Mellaha	30	17	
Army Aviation	64 th Recon Group 67 th Recon Group 129 th Recon Squadr.	-	-	Mellaha	11	-	
		Ro.37 bis.	8	Mellaha	9	-	
		Ca.310	1	Mellaha	-	-	
		Ca. 311	-	Castel Benito	7	-	
Aviation	145 th Marit Recon Squadr.	Cant. Z. 501	10	Caramanli seaplane base	10	3	
Colonial Garrison Aviation	1 st Group A.P.C.	Ghibli	13	Mellaha	20	3	of whom: 2 eff. aircraft; 2 in disposal. CAT; 2, Zuara; 1, Sirte for coll. also the 1 st Gr. APC has eff. aircraft : 1 Borea, 1 Ca.100, 2 Ca.164. II 2 nd Gr. APC, of the <i>Ghibli</i> 1 it is sanit. e Ca.133 eff. aircraft . II. Sahara bn. had 1 Ca.133 efficient aircraft .
		S.79	1	Mellaha	-	-	
	2 nd Group A.P.C.	Ghibli	2	Homs	18	-	
		Ca.311	1	Homs	-	-	
	Saharan Battalion	Ghibli S.81	14 4	Homs Homs	30 6	5 3	
Special Units	Trasp. Group (S.A.S.)	S.75	3	Castel Benito	6	6	
		S.74	1	Castel Benito	1	1	
		S.81	4	Castel Benito	3	-	
	614 th Sq. Soccorso	Ca.Z. 500	1	Caramanli seaplane base	4	2	

Appendix 4

GERMAN CORP IN AFRICA

COMMANDERS

N. 212/41 Secret.

Quan Gen. 23 April 1941

To the gentleman Commanders!

In the last days combat and force of resistance near some Italian unit have been repeated of the disagreeable cases of lack of discipline in. Therefore between the other day 22 April an Italian unit has suspend the combat after short time, also being supplied of all the modern arms (including tanks) and with sufficient artillery, and one has surrendered to 8-10 English tanks advancing. 200 men have fallen only here captive and have been lost numerous important material. A battalion of another division, later on carried ahead on the same positions under protection of some German hunter tanks, withdrew in the course of the day 2 times as a result of minimal activity of the artillery and enemy aviation. With such behavior in a decisive point of the front has been run the serious danger for the entire operation against Tobruk. That it is possible to cancel with the existing arms and decisive resistance every enemy point, also of tanks, has demonstrated the behavior to it of the units of the *Brescia* division, which have rejected equally strongly aimed of tanks and enemy infantry, it is advance until on their positions of artillery, and which with this 4 action have burnt armored car and 2 tanks and captured 5 light machine-guns, as also I have a certain number of prisoners.

Analogous facts must be attended also from all the other units of troops. Then it will not be able more it are to us doubt for the favorable outcome of the battle of Tobruk.

If but analogous cases of lack of combative will had to be repeated, will be forced to report for through of the Italian Armed forces high command to the Duce and putting under process to the Military Court of Rome the Commanders, Officials and troops. It is duty of all the troop commanders to fortify the employee units, also in case of special assignments, the necessary arms reinforcing them of tank destroyer, antiaircraft and artillery.

It is duty of the commanders and the troop, to fight with these arms in order to cancel every attempt of the enemy attack. Therefore it is necessary that the infantry comes grouped in shape of bench marks around to the artillery and the tank destroyer, so that has support and protection in case that join of the enemy tanks. These mixed bench marks of infantry, artillery and tank destroyer must be constituted are shared in all the field, with formation scaled towards the wings and the back; also in the positions of the batteries they must be employs single pieces scaled so that with presence of enemy tanks all the battery anytime is ready with all pieces towards all the directions.

They are convinced that with this employment in the attack and the defense also the units still do not accustomed to the combat will quickly take to confidence in their force and defensive power and that the enemy will endure strong losses in every attempt to approach itself.

The commanders of the Italian divisions must dedicate themselves personally for the application of these dispositions on the battlefield.

The shortcomings up to now appeared and the insufficient rendering of some unit of too much must clearly be discussed with the officers and the troops. With this they will come increased the confidence and the faith and the greater ones will be created proposed you for the final Victoria.

Hurray the Führer and the Duce, like pure the common Italian-German cause.

*The Commander of the German troops in Libya
and the German Corp in Africa
General ROMMEL*

VII TANK BATTALION M /13-40
COMMANDER

SUBJECT: REPORT

To Commander of the 32nd Tank Reg.
Military mail 132 T

In compliance with today's request I briefly and briefly (due to the particular situation in which this unit – Tobruk - investment and the consequent impossibility of having accurate data and reliable elements of judgment) the news related to the behavior of M.13/40.

Allow me to mention the technical behavior of other issues-equal in my opinion if not greater importance related to the personnel, organization, the other material and the use of the unit.

INTRODUCTION

The Bn. was formed on 10 February with staff from: one third from dissolved IV Bn. Tank L. who had attended a course of 25 days in Bracciano - for 2/3 by recalled a good half of them were on leave for several years (1911-1912 classes-1913 and 1914), and then with scant and outdated tank crew instruction.

The material arrived at the store on the same day of his arrival on a steamer and under the escort of a military officer and three troops shipped separately to Tripoli where it was discharged by local authorities (Office of sailings, the Joint Center, 200 etc.) and carried on various locations of Tripoli.

The Bn. arrived in Tripoli with another convoy several days later. The material was found in deplorable conditions because it had been downloaded by impractical-came to see for example: who was putting naphtha or water in oil reservoirs, water in the fuel oil, etc.-lack or scarcity of water in radiators; gross had been committed that errors had led to serious damage-life batteries, engine partly seized, broken transmissions, cylinder heads. .Regardless of what a large amount of material and accessories was gone-bread of this material was of secondary importance, a part was essential: cables, machinery, equipment replacement, spare parts, accessories, etc.

With the help of the auto-grouping command of the Comando Superiore Armed Forces NA. was good part solved the various deficiencies that were found.

In the short term in Tripoli were made numerous repairs including: 2 engines removed and three heads were replaced, and run pilot instructions and 2 shooting lessons.

On 13 March the Bn. departed from Tripoli and two-stage crawl reached Misurata where it was loaded on special trailers and transported 100 km. to El Aghella arriving on 20 March.

In that locality was continued the development of the tanks and started the tactical training of the Bn. by executing some platoon exercises. This training had lasted eight days because on 1st April the Bn. began the march that would lead to Tobruk.

To accelerate the movement toward Ajdabiya had Division Commander that two companies were auto-ported from 100 km to 28 km.

Missing the means of tow tractors were used by a group of 105.

The tractor drivers, however, used to tow the guns and not 4 wheel trailers with 14 tons over committed mistakes that led to the toppling of three tanks that were serious enough damage to be repairable with the means of the Bn.

On the afternoon of 5, commenced on path to Ajdabiya-Msus-Mechili-Tobruk area, marching in the desert that, due to shunting movements and other given orders personally by the Commander of the German Corps arrived by air, involved a journey of over 500 km in varied terrain.

Especially against were the weather conditions in which the march was accomplished, *ghibli*, hot South wind, sandy soil always enveloped the column in an impenetrable cloud of sand to a meter away and sometimes Rocky that he subjected the tormented the machines from every pessimistic prediction.

This is the summary framework in which took place the pursuit of the enemy.

I-TECHNICAL BEHAVIOR OF THE TANKS

a) *deficiencies found in:*

1st -The power of the engine (which as you know has been designed to withstand a weight of 8 tons) is too low for the weight of nearly 14 tons of the current tank. This leads to the need to use almost always way off the gears 1st and 2nd by subjecting the motor to continue efforts resulting in rapid wear.

2nd -the lack of air purifiers such as to prevent access to the cylinders sand led to a very rapid and profound wear & tear, of the pistons and piston rings which, after 500 miles of desert with Gambari, literally has the cylinder bell with almost total loss of compression.

3rd -probably due to shortcomings of naphtha-filtering dirty part on its own despite repeated filtering preventing, and good part for the particular environment conditions-the functioning of the injectors and pump has proved mischievous.

Consequences:

-pump and unsettling especially primers that Pistons, instead of pulverizing the naphtha, the Jet entering combustion chambers and remaining unburnt scrolls along the walls of the cylinders and the deficiency referred to in no. 2, falls in diluting oil Cup and decreasing the viscosity and quality lubricants. As evidence of this fact it has a severe level increase in competition.

This lubricating oil capacity diminished (already in itself is not suitable because of gradation semi fluid instead of extra-dense as prescribed, but nowhere to be found in Cologne) will result in seizures, mergers and very frequent overheating of the engine.

-hard and very frequent jams rack of the pump Rod. It had to resort to applying commands in iron wire or cords.

4th -valve lubrication Failure resulting in the seizure of the stem of the same.

5th -easy displacement of the engine, due to the loosening of the distribution chain, which leads to the contortion of the downpipe tappet command.

This very serious inconvenience because to be repaired involves unthreading of engine by means of a hoist.

6th -feed pump defective. The tab trigger lever slice with ease. Metal bellows (chamber) that cut into the bends after a few hours of work with immediate stopping the engine.

The entire sheet of chambers of Bn. ran out in a short time and have had to leave out of the tanks for this trivial inconvenience.

7th -short Break of power pump filter glass. It had to resort to makeshift, due to the subsequent lack of spare shorts to use bullets from 47 cases appropriately adapted.

8th -frequent leakage of rear Cap distribution tree that determines the total loss of oil. To work around this problem, it takes about 8 hours of work.

9th -inertial Starter. It is best to fly on this organ that is absolutely unsuitable for the purpose and a most unique fragility. In the Bn with 46 wagons they said 35 inefficient from the early days.

10th -cooling. It is absolutely inefficient, not for quantity of water but for the system.

Very frequent problem is the continual breakdown of rubber sleeves (not just the top ones to blow that should act as a safety valve and which are not), but especially breakage or slippage of the lower sleeves-from the radiator to water pump-and combat cabin interiors with serious consequences for staff (a dozen cases of Burns).

Radiators are applied in such a way that suffer from frequent disordering and also strong losses of water.

Breakdown of drop tanks inside.

Faulty water pump gland.

11th - Consumption. Were, especially in the desert, simply triple than those laid down.

12th -Electrical system. Because of their location and leave batteries quickly evaporate the distilled water. Four batteries are scarce for a starter motor torque even in wagons of this Bn. that being without radio have no extra start-up energy consumption.

b) Gear Faults

1st - Gears front always in shaft to other gears (perhaps by defect of material or excessive effort to which they are subjected and which do not have the ability to withstand) break and shells with ease.

2nd -gearboxes that break because the gear retaining ring of the secondary loosens and dropping the fixing pin of those gears between the same results in the breakdown of the exchange rates. You tried to remedy that problem by replacing changes that are disassembled, the plug with a suitable bolt.

3rd -breaking of front teeth gear shaft.

4th -The constructive exchange General complex is absolutely unable to withstand the tractive effort which is currently subject.

c) *Defects in the epicycloid group*

There have been two cases of loosening the nut and subsequent unbolting of the pulley attached to the shaft with relative bearing failure.

d) *Defects of the hull and suspension*

Good behavior on these lands. There have been two cases of tanks that, marching in the cloud of sand have bumped against the tank that preceded them, causing the plate to unbolting support of idlers. It would be desirable to have a more solid fixation of the plate which has the bolt too deep pits.

e) *Amour Defects)*

Anything positive you can say about because of four enemy tanks hit by three have remained in the area strongly beaten by the opponent and was not yet possible to make checks. However, is the fact that the certain pieces opposing anti-tank (from 37) repeatedly hit them in such a way as to be immobilized and injure and kill the crew.

f) *Tower, casemate, various facilities*

Would need a system of protection against sand movement devices of casemate turret and weapons, which in march in duist and clouds of sand raised by the *ghibli* and tanks themselves after a few minutes he stuck in place and require painful recovery work.

Conclusion

Ultimately it is a tank with an engine that certainly would work well in metropolitan territory with the weight of 8 tons for which it was designed, but that in the African territory with the *ghibli*, sand, other inclement conditions to all notes and adding other 6 tons is absolutely unfit despite treatment and devices used to make it work.

Tank units that must operate under fire cannot and must not have the worry that their means are not put into motion, which split with the exchange rate, unconscionable that you emptied of water or oil spilling and that when price of hardship, trailers and folds you started should proceed only in first or second speed with unsuitable for flying stunts offend and defend themselves.

In the action of the 17th at hill 209 West of Tobruk was saved only the tank that, more efficient than others, could march into third and avoid being easy prey to enemy fire.

It therefore considers that the M/13 tank why can truly explain the action that they all expect to be with-without resorting to facings of sorts, unboring type -a powerful and efficient engine worthy of our automotive industry which in this field should not be second to none.

The-PERSONAL BEHAVIOR

The demeanor of the staff was in combat than any eulogy.

Two company commanders and three crews fallen; two officers and seven injured tank-of which three voluntarily returned immediately to the unit-demonstrating is not enough non-heroic spirit and the will to fight.

In the march along the coast and especially in the haunting and tormenting carried out in the desert, but it proved inadequate and hasty technical training of personnel.

It is not possible to obtain an M /13 driver with 25 days at Bracciano in which you can barely, bundling two hours of driving, to learn the elementary knowledge of driving.

a M /13 (diesel engine) pilot, although taken from drivers of light tank needs technically months of intense instruction in suitable environment.

It is absolutely not possible to claim that a man will lead to hundreds of miles of wilderness, a machine which knows only superficially the Constitution and operation.

It is not possible for a man alone-or at most two-pilot for hundreds of miles to 15 hours a day continuously.

It is necessary that each man of the crew is an experienced pilot and who can put their hands in their tank.

The personnel of the troop. Why should the officers have a profound technical background and may be in addition to the chiefs and also feeders of the masters suitable for ascending, ability and experience.

Two of the commanders of this company Bn. six months of seniority had to Lieutenant and the third just over a year.

To command a tank Division officers who are required to the enthusiasm and the heroic will to fight join the thoughtfulness and experience that comes only from a longish units.

If the preparation technique was pretty poor, the tactical preparation we can say it is absolutely not because they believe you can feel, even partially, trained staff who had executed six shooting lessons with cannon and machine guns, and just two or three platoon exercises.

This was not for lack of will, but only for lack of time, which imposed to throw towards the enemy the Bn. regardless of its training conditions.

I must represent as is absolutely necessary to have real tank units, review the staff recruitment, only those exalted into civilian life exercises related to specialty trades. Doing also-with prizes, special payroll or extra pay-generous rely on permanent or very long staff.

German tank units that have worked with us these days is noticed immediately the great technical preparation of the personnel who served for years in the specialty.

The current phase I heard repeating like a chorus was this: "*for a tanks a few days, to do a crew takes years*"..

III-battalion and Organic services

The staff of the Bn. does not match at all it means or needs men of war in the colony.

The current organic-that perhaps could still go to war in their homeland, with short distances, close to their bases, their workshops, their deposits — are here in Africa as a drop in the bucket, when distances become 600-700 km, and even more from their starting base.

In the Bn. to serve 46 tanks with 184 solders there are approximately 170 men with 15 vehicles. These trucks are barely sufficient to carry 170 men; How do you deliver all materials, spare parts! fuel, lubricants, water and food supplies for hundreds of miles and many days?

In the Bn. M 13 there is a workshop with the repair team and recoveries of 21 men, of whom actually just two or three are deserving of the name mechanics; others are fillers that serve barely to force maneuvers.

In the march in the wilderness had to abandon tanks-of which is now in the process of recuperation-exclusively for the lack of a proper equipped recovery service that, if he existed, would have consisted of recover and bring in a very short time to fight a considerable number of tanks.

After the occupation of Mechili, major German commander of the column which I made part for two days, knew that I had achieved such a resorts with about 40 tanks 14 thus expressed: "*you did a miracle with your primitive means! I've taken 8 on 64..*"

But hurry to add that a few hours later, about 50 tanks had reached, recovered and reported in line by his recovery service of Bn.; others had no concern because the regimental recovery service would provide.

My Bn. managed to recover with unheard-of 6 wagons that fatigue then had to be abandoned again in the next stage.

The Germans have a recovery team of 8 vehicles for company and a recoveries unit of the Bn. (not counting that of the regiment) which is commanded by a captain and engineer consists of around a hundred trucks, crawler tractors of particular special trailers and carrier power wagons.

Suffice it to say that while in the Bn. Italian there is a bolt escort in Bn. is there a special German cars exclusively used for nuts and bolts; This has me especially for having done the head myself.

We have no means of transport suitable in tractors suitable for the purpose. Every time you have to resort to replicate that are worse than bad, because they put in crisis the Bn. tanks and the unit to which the means are removed.

German Regiment in the means of transport, all suitable for the purpose for which should be used (with the exception of cabin and debuted as), are in the proportion of eight for each tank and the men in the following proportion: less than 700 fighters, more than 2000 employees in services.

Lubricant supply service and water in our departments. Does not exist as a receptacle that stem from 200 liters cumbersome, not easy to handle. In German there are units instead the canisters made; from 20 liters which is refueled in Bn. until tanks or vehicle, and of which every machine in special installations brings a large number of reserve.

We can give a small reserve of oil or water to any means you have to hope to find our way of old abandoned gasoline cans by the enemy.

The service supplies while driving in the desert was made by god's miracle, does not hesitate to define these, made by the staff of the Bn. and some officers that later from Ajdabiya parties into the unknown (not knowing nor where he had gone, nor where he had directed the Bn.) managed to reach me leading me naphtha, water and food.

In 10 days of travel in the desert, chasing the enemy (formerly employed by a German column, then by this left without orders) I had no assistance from anyone and only for the desire to reach the enemy managed to get to my Regiment around Tobruk.

Catering and food of comfort. Simply inadequate.

A box, two biscuits and a bottle of dirty water of naphtha, that's what had my men. Even the coffee because with the gear ration is not, i.e. when it needs it most. Only one day we had the friendship coffee offered by *PanzerJager* Bn. German major Rao, amazed that we didn't like their hot coffee, Orange-cognac, chocolate and jam.

And now after 15 days of dry food has coffee ranks because it was purchased by official payments.

Health service.

It can be said that does not exist.

The doctor, two coffins and two stretchers climbed on a truck filled with barrels of naphtha, and German company there are only two vehicles and a medical vehicle.

Conclusion.

Today the Bn. lies with:

- a quarter of its weak and asthmatic tanks, barely able to move, but always facing the enemy around Tobruk.

- a quarter of the tanks stuck along the road traveled in the area or stop the opposing artillery with their cargo of fallen heroes.

- half of the tanks painfully recovered and painfully working toward the base of Derna where it will be dismantled and overhauled.

Ultimately all the Bn. needs to be met, recovered the material still missing, reviewed all the tanks (replacing different engines and many parts that will come from Italy obtain necessary transportation, reorder, units replace the officers and men killed.

For all this work I will need a period of time certainly not less than 40-50 days and it always depending on the arrival of the replacement materials.

Bir Checla-Tobruk, April 21, 1941

The greatest battalion commander
F. TO S. ANDREANI

SUPREME COMMAND
IL DUCE

N. 4003S/OP – Secret and confidential Staff JUNE 19th 1941-XIX

The Chief of Navy S.M.R.
The head of Aeronautical S.M.R.
and, for knowledge:
The Chief of Army S.M.R.

SUBJECT: AERO-NAVAL ACTION GROUNDED AGAINST THE BRITISH
FLEET IN THE MEDITERRANEAN.

With the upcoming return to the Fleet of the R. Ship “Vittorio Veneto”, with the possibility of having air departments already destined to fight in Greece, and you become present the program of aero-torpedo bombers in progress, you can prepare the areo-naval action grounded against the British fleet in the Mediterranean, the G.S. of the R. Navy and R. Air Force have together designed right the provisions of this Supreme Command (f. n. 9740/op. 25 May).

To implement an effective and timely intervention against enemy naval forces it is necessary to create a grid that allows you to act with the mass of the air and naval forces against the British fleet rates in areas where airline security is assured, according to the study mentioned above.

I Have

1. The action will be fitted in the area including: West between 7th Meridian and Sicily; in the East, up to the limits of autonomy of the fighters (11 mg from Capo Passero);
2. the location of ships shall be such as to allow the timely meeting of forces at sea;
3. the deployment of the aircraft, using the island bases, should make it possible to gravitate to the most number of torpedo and bomber units to both East and West of the Strait of Sicily and must guarantee an effective aerial protection of our hunting naval units;
4. the location of naval units and deployment of air units should always allow the conduct of the normal activities of war;
5. the action shall be ensured the greatest number possible of aero-torpedo bombers; You must then prepare various basics with what is necessary to move quickly and gather aerial - torpedoes depending on the area where it can be arranged their action.
6. the heads of G. S. of the Navy and the air force ensure the urgent preparation of the bases, the deployment of forces, the necessary links and direct agreements take to start soon training units

intended to participate in the action. Everyone should be constantly inform this Supreme Command.

With studies and exercises are perfected and made as much as possible fast aero-naval links.

7. The Chief of staff of the air force will designate a general officer to coordinate everything that refers to the Organization of the air mass, training aircraft and units to carry out exercises with naval forces.

The Chief of staff of the Navy will designate an Admiral responsible for collaborating with the General Officer predicted for all with regard to the provision relating to the aero-naval cooperation which is the subject of this order.

8. On the basis of operational study accomplished and already in your possession will be compiled by the two Staffs the consequent Executive, plans to enter automatically into action with an executive order.

MUSSOLINI

Appendix 7

DER DEUTSCHE GENERAL BEIM HAUPTQUARTIER
DER ITALIENISCHEN WEHRMACHT
MILITÄR ATIACHÈ -ROME

Roma, 10.6.1941

Note

Following a report by Marshal Keitel on June 2, 1941 military talks at the Brenner pass, the Führer has expressed the following thoughts and proposals on the conduct of the war in North Africa:

1st) The most urgent task for the continuation of the war in North Africa is insurance of supplies for the maintenance and reinforcement of the combative force Tobuk front. This cannot be achieved by means of naval communications, security of airport bases and logistic stores. This protection will be truly effective only if-regardless of convoy protection and coastal surveillance by maritime and air forces will be strengthened:

- a) Aerial formations (fighters) in North Africa;
- b) Anti-Aircraft protection;
- c) Coastal artillery in the basics of call. You cannot think about the influx of new loss less too sensitive forces before having secured and organized this protection.

2nd) to General Rommel lacks long range heavy artillery to destroy the far superior English artillery, gnawing besieging troops, and to be able to continue successfully the siege, offensively. Therefore the material necessities that you must send to the Germanic Corp in Africa is the German heavy artillery (Group 100 mm guns and howitzers group. from 210 mm). This is, if protected against attacks with bombs from the air by means of special weapons of Defense and absolutely secure against aerial bombing, higher than the English defense.

3rd) will be examining what other modern means to be effective against modern features of Tobruk and which of them can be delivered. You think tanks with flame launchers of long-range, more use of incendiary bombs (unconditional action by means of oil) and cluster bombs of large caliber launched by aircraft based from Greece or Crete. The premise for the continuation of the offensive against Alexandria is the fall of Tobruk.

4th) for the Organization of supplies is by tending to the following principle:

a) continuous transport Ammo, fuel, supplies and spare parts for frontline troops solely on the most direct route, i.e. to Benghazi and Derna, just that these bases are sufficiently protected.

b) Transport once via Tripoli and Bizerte, such as too many reinforcements, artillery, columns of vehicles, ground staff of airpower.

5th) to transport rapidly according to 4a) Hitler proposes particularly to use light craft of the Italian war Navy like we did in Norway. The cargo compartment in destroyers or torpedo boats of less modern types to be used for this purpose would be to get by removing all weapons except those anti-aircraft. Grand Admiral Raeder will advance, among other more detailed proposals relating to Admiral Riccardi.

6th) given the occupation of Crete will be to study the establishment of a new naval communications in addition from Italy via Greece in North Africa.

7th) in the opinion the German classification of urgency of the transport to Northern Africa must take against the views set out above.

VON RINTELEN

SUPREME COMMAND
Op/AFRICA

12 June 1941

Note

The thoughts and proposals of the Führer on the conduct of the war in North Africa communicated with the note on 10th current were highly prized and is pleased to inform that coincide with the directives already drawn by the Duce and the ongoing action by this Comando Supremo.

In particular, it shall specify the following points.

1st) Safety of transport.

As soon as we finished the logistical features in air bases in North Africa will be strengthened fighter units located therein.

You are sending 13 anti-aircraft batteries of various sized and the batteries of 20 mm and is preparing a further sending another 12 batteries of different caliber and of 20 to increase the anti-aircraft defense of bases and essentially of ports.

It is also going to send 5 Italian coastal batteries and two German coastal units (of 150 mm) to improve the Anti-Ship Defense of place of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica.

2nd) Attack on Tobruk.

To reinforce the heavy artillery deployed on the front of Tobruk, in addition to German artillery in attendance (Group of 100 cannons and 210 howitzers group) is providing to send other groups of 105, from 149/28, from 149/40 and 152/37.

Waiting for all those guns can be deployed around Tobruk Please note that will be very useful air action of X C.A. T. departing from Crete, and asks that this rate of German aviation has as its objective the ships which supplies Tobruk and enemies features of that fort.

3rd) Unitization of destroyers for transport.

Has already been studied the use of destroyers and torpedo boats for the transposition. But, apart from the limited load that these types of ships, we cannot allow a wide use of such ships, because it would reduce the number of torpedo boats available for escort, with convoys that would reduce the number of convoys that you can make.

4th) Ports of unloading and routes.

The port of Benghazi is currently full of shipwrecks sunk and cannot accept convoys composed of more than two steamers of modest tonnage; cannot be used with certainty that when completed the installation of aerial torpedo nets and has completed the anti-aircraft defense.

Was studied the possibility of small fast convoys on a direct route to Benghazi, but had to be scrapped because of a lack of suitable ships:

the 5 fast ships available were en route to Benghazi and 4 were lost. The Italian Navy does not possess suitable tonnage ships to the port of Benghazi with speeds up to 10-12 knots and the liaison Staff of the German Navy, asked about it said also it didn't have any Mediterranean steamship currently available for the traffic in question.

You are organizing traffic on an experimental basis, to be made with isolated steamers with speed of around 10 knots from Bari or Brindisi directly to Benghazi. These steamers should be protected by appropriate cruises to be made with the planes of X C.A.T. from Heraklion towards South-East to the coast of Africa. If the experiment will give good results will be increased traffic: the homeport when the rail service in Greece will be restored, they can be transported to Piraeus, with West Crete-Benghazi route, which will present a number of advantages for traffic safety itself.

In conclusion, as is noted by the Führer, the most urgent problem to be solved for good conduct of the war in North Africa is to quickly bring reinforcements needed. As with the place of Libya, even when they are implemented all the measures mentioned above, it is not possible to make all necessary transport immediately, you must start urgently the maximum possible utilization of the port of Bisena.

As already seen with Marshal Keitel, the Duce remains waiting to know the German transport plane through this route and when and how you can incorporate Italian transport.

THE CHIEF OF STAFF OF THE GERMAN ARMY

14 June 1941

THE SUPREME COMMAND OF THE ITALIAN ARMED FORCES IN N.A.
GENERAL OF THE ARMY EXCELLENCE GARIBOLDI

Excellency, I have the honor to inform you that on the establishment of the German liaison officer at the Italian Supercomando in N.A.

The Supreme Command of the German army from several concordant reports on aggregate African war theatre, drew the belief that various tasks of the German Corps to your addition with regard to major issues of supplies and their operation, due to the large distances, they reached such a huge amount, which the forces of the German Corps are not enough more to their execution.

Therefore, the Supreme Command of the German Army decided, in agreement with the Italian Comando Supremo, by seconding a Staff under the command of Major-General Gause, who will be entrusted with the following tasks:

a) Maintain the connection between the German Army Command and the command of the Italian armed forces in N.A.;

b) Treat all Affairs of the German Corps in Africa, as the Comando Superiore of the Italian armed forces in N.A.

c) Arrange logistical issues in the rear of the German Corps in Africa.

d) Collaborate with the German General at the Comando Supremo command (Rome) in the Affairs of the German Africa transport.

Will be subjected to the General staff of link:

1st) the Commander of the German troops, Maj. Gen. Mueller-Gebhard. .

2nd) the first Quartermaster in Libya, more than head of the General Staff Schleusener.

The position of the liaison officer seconded to Your Excellency German General at the Italian Comando Supremo (in Rome), Leut. Colonel Heggenreiner, remains completely unchanged.

I would be grateful to your Excellency, if they ordered the German Army Command was that you liked.

With my best wishes for further success of the troops commanded by

Your Excellency, I have the honor to declare your Excellency's

Very submissive

HALDER

COLONEL GENERAL

Chief of staff of the German Army

SUPREME COMMAND
OPERATIONS-EXCHEQUER OFFICE AFRICA
PROT. N. 30069/OP.

JUNE 1941

To their Ecc. General Gariboldi, Top Commander FF. AA. A.S.I.
and, for knowledge:
Ecc. General Roatta, Army Chief G.S.

Subject: LIAISON OFFICER OF THE COMANDO SUPERIORE FF. AA. OF THE A.S.I.

The German General at this Supreme Command has delivered the note No. 275, of which a copy is attached, on the establishment of a liaison officer at this Comando Superiore.

Were asked verbally clarification about points a) and b) of sub-section 2nd, and General von Rintelen said:

- that nothing has changed in relation to the Protocol established by Keitel-Guzzoni (passed to this command with f. n. 6339 on 11 February u.s.);

- that the contact between the Top Military Command in North Africa and the command of the German army, is to be considered solely as has relevance to organic and logistical field, and aims to enable the General Gariboldi to express any desires in a matter for which the *AfrikaKorps* depends directly on the German Army Command, as in the mentioned Protocol;

- It is quite clear that in the field of application of the General Rommel depend directly from General Gariboldi and then Italian Comando Superiore and command responsibility is unique and exclusively Italian;

- the establishment of the staff of General Gause only aims to lighten General Rommel everything relates to supplies and the protection of communications and to allow that he dedicate exclusively to operational part;

- that at first it was decided to establish a second Chief of staff of General Gariboldi, but later dropped the idea for fear that you could think of German interference in the employment field;

- that by sending General Gause is the German side not to restrict but to increase the chances of General Gariboldi in exercise of command on "*Africa-Korps*" in every field, not just in that operation.

It is believed that on the basis of these clarifications the action of General Gause and his staff, it can be from you, Excellency, well framed and defined, avoiding any interference as it is the prerogative of the Comando Supremo and this Comando Superiore.

The Chief of the General staff
CAVAILLERO

CONFERENCE with ROMMEL-GAUSE of 21 JUNE 1941

1st -relations with Supercomando-insertion S.M. Gause

Rommel says that relations with Ecc. Gariboldi, and his Chief of G.S. Gambarà, are excellent.

Gause says his duties and his intentions. Net impression that inserting his G.S. should not give rise to problems

2nd -the current situation of the C.A.T.

-In line with good staggering deep, between the sea, Step Halfaja and Sidi Omar to the particular strengths:

Italian units of the Division « Ariete » and «Trento», and 2 quick artillery regiments, 15th Armored Division Germanic, 5th light Division less Germanic Schützen Brigade.

-In line around the fort of Tobruk, starting from the right: “Trento” Division-minus the above elements,

«Pavia» Division,

Schützen Brigade of the 5th light Division,

«Brescia» Division,

-In reorganization, between Ain Gazala and Dema, “Ariete” Division. This has:

8th bersaglieri, reduced to 1 bn, forward, towards Sollum,

VIII Tank Bn. M/13, with 11 tanks (1): id.,

1 group of 75: id.,

rear: Reg. L tanks, overall out of order (should be replaced almost all engines),

VII Bn. M/13, on 32 tanks, in reconstitution,

1 group of 75 in reconstitution.

-Is the inclusion of «Pavia» investment of Tobruk which allowed release of the Germanic forces, who have against maneuvered. Have also been brought forward these elements of « Ariete » already pulled back for their reorganization.

-Germanic troops are those notes (5th light-15th armor) plus 4 «Oasenkompanien»- (from companies), some coastal batteries, and some new services.

-According to Rommel his divisions would be very trying. They lost, from the beginning, 3600 men. among dead, wounded and missing (likely to include even the sick).

Tanks and armored cars: 1/3 would be destroyed, 1/3 under repair and 1/3 more efficient.

Anti-tank weapons: 60% would be out of order.

3rd -intentions for the immediate future

The English attack of the 15th current was very strong. Was conducted with

about 400 tanks, of which about half of the Mark II A (2).

The enemy seemed sure of success: came into action in masses of tanks, processing-says Rommel-almost on parade. It had as its first goal the liberation of Tobruk, and as second to Derna.

The use of 88 pieces (and 75) in anti-tank shot, made it possible to knock out enemy 237 tanks, cause about half of the biggest type. Against the latter's armour was efficient even the 50-piece, at a distance of approximately 400 m. Many of the tanks remained on the spot will be called into use. Captured: 319 men, including about a dozen officers.

However the fight was hard, and-at some point-Rommel has also considered the possibility of having to retreat, abandoning the investment of Tobruk.

The defenders of that fort never moved, but it is certain that would have taken the offensive, where English columns from the East would bring more (it seems they had orders to attack the 16). '

Investment divisions facing East and South were in need to outline a second front, back to the one fronting the square, to fend off possible threats on their back, ...

Rommel says in parentheses very well the demeanor of our troops in recent fighting. Resisted vigorously. Paintings and ranks have anti-tank action, who are familiar and tanks await at short distances, before you start shooting. Is that the intermingling of the Italian-German units gives excellent results.

All in all, the crisis has been severe. Rommel thought for sure that the opponent will retry the test soon, with larger forces. Don't you think that the lesson had to quash the enemy: the British ambitions-he says-have suffered a blow, but it must be realized that the scale was very swinging.

Therefore considers it essential to make available the mobile reserve for now almost exclusively represented by the two German divisions. And the fact that most of them found the 15 mobile who saved the situation.

But now, apart from the losses and fatigue, this reserve is back online (between sea and Sidi Omar), and Englishmen were arrested a short distance; and-not least-active artillery Hill.

Says so what are-according to him-the measures to be taken to replace in line the two Germanic divisions, and expresses the wish that the work be strengthened-already begun-for the road switch, to the South of Tobruk, the via Balbia (currently the siding for a 90 km long track, heavily damaged by the heavy traffic, and that puts out a large amount of vehicles).

(The view Rommel desired and were then exposed by General Gause to «Supercomando», which has decided to make available to Rommel the Division «Savona», to allow him to replace it with the East front part at least of the Germanic troops. The Germans assure that assign anti-tank units to the Division, who is still without juridical. Supercomando also suggests Rommel of further substitution of various units mobile with *Schützen* battalions, of which afterwards).

In essence, Rommel believed that in the present, and until they are ready forces and means necessary to do offensively against fort Tobruk,

There is more to do than put themselves in the best possible conditions to deal with new and more heavy attacks (...).

Don't have news sending, or sending project, other G.U.

The Gause speaks at length of maritime transport. Considers that the problem depend almost exclusively relief capacity of ports of Tripoli and-especially-in Benghazi, and their anti-aircraft and coastal protection.

Has no idea of substantial transportation handicaps (escorts); learns with amazement that already now the exhaust port capacity is adequate to what can access it; also exists for Benghazi a problem of displacement-speed of steamers, difficult to solve bile; and that the defenses are already good.

(*Essentially* the Germans to believe that the air here has not done anything while you are doing it, and ignore the essential data of the problem).

The Gause had never heard of the problem Tunis-Bizerte; She then convinced-hand-figures of importance of its solution.

5th) "*Rommel's Army*"

Just as I mentioned I was given to Rommel-Gause the potential convenience of Group 6 Italian-German divisions currently under Rommel's command (and possibly other tributaries to the continuation of time) in groupings (e.g. tactical A/A), differentiated according to their tasks.

Rommel admitted that, especially with his Haggard G. S., has a hard time hold direct command of 6 divisions. Would gladly:

-*in the first half*: 1 essentially Italian group of divisions, charged with the investment of Tobruk. Italian Commander. 1 essentially Germanic group of divisions, charged with the defense of the Eastern Front (Sollum -Sidi Omar). German commander;

-*second half*: as above, plus another essentially Italian group of divisions, with Italian Commander, in charge of the defense of the Eastern front and above the fort of Bardia (in which case the Germanic group referred to above would only mobile reserve function).

As for the overall command of these two or three groups, Rommel took no position: he mentioned that he would not have nothing against to keep only the command of the German divisions, while the Italian group or groups depend directly from Supercomando-as would not have nothing against keeping the overall command (the thing though should be authorized from Berlin as for that he would take over as Commander of the army, much more than at present).

Supercomando decided to leave things as they are at present (i.e. all divisions under Rommel's immediate). This is to avoid that, on the occasion of the next likely retry opponent, Rommel, unhooked from direct responsibility of Tobruk, uses his troops to only profit of the East front.

Later, after the crisis represented by opposing offensive, or that possibility vanished, Supercomando aims to give Rommel commanded two groups (one Italian in charge of the defense of the Eastern front, and that German mobile reserve), and taking its investment orders of Tobruk, whose troops would switch to a general Italian dependencies.

6th -*German Aviation*

In fact the aviation Rommel has less freedom than before. In its only a reconnaissance squadron and a squadron of courier aircraft.

The German air force, fighting in Libya, are part of X C.A. T. command (in Athens), and depend on the General, who resides in Fröhlich Derna. Include: 1 fighter group; 2 groups of Stukas; 1 Squadron of "Destroyer".

Those forces intervene in favor of Rommel, upon request from him addressed to Fröhlich. Also act in independent actions of C.A.T.

The competition is permitted of the remaining forces of the C.A.T., starters from Crete, but upon request addressed to Berlin. In practice, however-in emergencies-as has happened recently, the C.A.T. adheres to direct requests.

7th -*Capture of Tobruk-Offensive on Egypt*

In analogy to orders had, I heard Rommel's ideas about it. Will report back after the issue with Supercomando, as expected.

I just now to say:

-about the Tobruk Rommel is warning that should attempt to capture the place, having collected and put in foot of work forces and means, which will, according to him, from 6 to 8 weeks. It is only if the action did not succeed that we could reduce to pure encapsulation of the fort;

-about Egypt I feel that Rommel has not yet studied the issue thoroughly. Exhibited only very general ideas. Think that we cannot start the action before the end of November.

MARIO ROATTA

(1) The battalion did not came into action. Pulled off a platoon of the "Trento". The remaining tanks were damaged on the runway South of Tobruk, which afterwards. Recovery is underway.

(2) Weight 25 Ton - front amour m/80 m armament: 40 piece, or 87 short gun. Someone talks about amour in two slabs with hollow space (as in other known types), but with the cavity filled with cement. Anyway I will go to see these tanks, and will send a copy to Rome.

IL DUCE OF FASCISM
HEAD OF GOVERNMENT

24 July 1941 XIX

MEMORANDUM ON THE POLITICO-MILITARY SITUATION

1.-In the moment-summer of 1941-the Italy has two sides and two potential fronts.

The first act is at the cyrenaic front. Is a static front, in which we cannot take the initiative to Tobruk) because it resists. b) because our forces are insufficient. c) because the enemy forces are undergoing gradual accretion.

Only a new political situation, namely a strong correction in the attitude of Turkey or other unpredictable events can afford to take the initiative. The forces that I consider essential for defensive and offensive are: 2 Italian armored divisions, 2 motorized divisions in Italy, 6 normal divisions, 2 German divisions; total 12. To be - relatively quiet -we need a mass of Italian-German aircraft of not less than 500.

I do not think the current Commander of the Aerial Armed Forces at the height of its tasks.

2.-at the other end in place is the Eastern-Russian. Given how minor of our States have done so, you have to propose a second motorized Corp more or less depending on the possibility-in addition to Galbiati Bn.-. We cannot be less present in Slovakia and can repay it to the ally.

Potential Front.

The hostile attitude of France ambiguous already noticed in Berlin to take the necessary measures to face any eventuality. The French front has three branches: Alpine, Corsican, Tunisian. I consider it necessary for the Alpine front: 1 Armored Division, 1 motorized, 4 alpine, 4 normal infantry.

Corsica: 3 regular divisions.

For Tunisia: 3 normal and 1 motorized divisions.

3.-the fluidity of the situation created requires the utmost vigilance. To be ready to every demand on the sector that goes -roughly- by Sava in Kotor, it takes no less than 10 divisions of which at least 2 armored and 2 motorized.

4.-A last faced potential can be one of our metropolitan Islands; It takes 4 divisions for Sicily and 3 Sardinia.

Given the divisions that govern the Albania and Greece, it appears that there is in the Valley of the Po no mass of maneuver available.

I think it is necessary for the Constitution of this mass of at least 20 divisions. In the spring of '42 the army must have no less than 80 divisions.

MUSSOLINI

GENERAL GOVERNMENT OF LIBYA
COMANDO SUPERIORE ARMIES IN NORTH AFRICA
GENERAL STAFF

N. 01/10847 OP.

P.M. IL 26 JULY 1941 XIX

Subject: REPORT ON THE ACCOMPLISHED RECONNAISSANCE AT THE EASTERN FRONT'S
TROOPS (22-25 JULY 19 1941 XIX)

*To Excellency General Ugo Cavallero
Chief of the General staff*

Came last night from a familiarization trip lasted four days and during which I wanted to make contact with all commanders of G.U., and here and there with various strongholds, troops in order to get a direct knowledge of General Officers Commanding and Vice Commanders of G.U., make accurate account of the environment in which they live and fight, feeling the pulse command and morale of the troops and see the main needs.

General Rommel, he personally accompanied the visit made to the 'Savona' Division (Bir Ghirba), and all Italian and German strongholds located along the pass Sidi Omar - Alfaia- Sollum.

With General Rommel I had a long conversation, in which the same wanted to express myself in very good shape, but without reticence, his thoughts on the command action of commanders of G.V. and actual value of Italian troops. The picture that I drew General Rommel, showed me to know General and soldiers very well, it's not true to say the least-the most comfortable, but unfortunately answers to truth, but largely due to causes which find their origin outside the environment of same G.V.

Prior to expose what I personally found, I feel that I must report to summarize the thoughts of General Rommel.

a) *The Troops:*

The Italian soldier is disciplined, sober, good worker and as the Germans to work in fortified Earth; If attacked reacts well; but lacks bite to the attack and, above all, an adequate training; many actions have failed solely to deficient coordination between the fire of artillery and heavy weapons and the advance of the infantry.

The lack of adequate means of resupply and repair, quantitative deficiency of vehicles and tanks have also meant that during motion actions Italian units arrive at their posts incomplete; the shortage of means of transport and supply-in Italian-drives organic causes, especially the G.U., cannot be kept in reserve and, therefore, it cannot count on their timely intervention.

For these reasons the General Rommel considers the Italian units good for Defense, but not for the attack.

b) commanders to G.U.

-General Zambon, commanding the *Brescia* Division: he is down on his health; gives

though all his activities and is very diligent; would like to do, but he has taken over the thought that cannot now claim the troops more than harm, and that the Division needs to change because officers and ranks are worn out and tired for long stay in Marmarica; This opinion that General Rommel doesn't share because the Division, after all, doesn't have suffered the slightest losses.

I was also made to understand that there is complete agreement between General Zambon and divisional infantry commander General Predieri. But since the General Rommel was restricted to a simple hint I intend to better explain the reality of the situation.

-*General Franceschini*, in charge of the command of the *Pavia* Division, and General Lombardi, divisional infantry commander; "*I'm from the shortest time of others in front of Tobruk; both good and activate*".

-*General Nuvoloni*, Trento Division Commander: the judges now a Division Commander very energetic as in the early days of action on Tobruk Division, a little disoriented, in unclear has lost two whole battalions which have not withstood the counterattack because troops employed in clumps: "nothing can be said of the Deputy Commander General Bansal.

-*General Baldassare* "led his Division very well advanced both in the occupation of positions in front of Tobruk currently held by *Pavia*. Colonel Mamman as his regiment was particularly distinguished."

-*General Maggiani* commanding the *Savona* Division, a few days ago under Rommel "made good impression for clear and precise orders that gave and for the impetus given to works well assisted by Divisional infantry commander General Buttafuoco".

Very well behaved General *Rovere*, artillery commander on the eastern front, and the Colonel *Grati*, Commander of 2nd Swift Art., who has always cooperated with German troops.

General Rommel wants to emphasize that "*there exists with Italian troops close harmony and no difficulty between the Italians and Germans collaboration.*"

The picture made by General Rommel about combat ability of our units, undoubtedly responds to the reality field; though I did look at the same Rommel, that reason before that attitude does not depend on lack of aggressive spirit of our units, but by quantitative and qualitative inadequacy of the means of fire they are equipped, in comparison to the power and the number of British armored vehicles, as well as the paucity of our logistics equipment, resulting from both the organic composition of our units (motorized only was *Trento* who now have 80%-assets 80%-vehicle) who do not have their own means of transport to the car and with many difficulties in receiving from the Motherland since it would be necessary to keep and improve the equipment itself. Anyway-I added-the problem is a matter of careful consideration on my part and my command that, where necessary, the measure will also remove from Tripolitania everything isn't there is absolutely vital, to give way to G.U. in a line proper armament, making rounds in line regiments and treat specific trainings

I admired the soldiery frankness of General Rommel in expressing his thoughts, but I also had the impression that he, with the proposed framework, aimed mainly to show me that, being the only troops capable of offensive action and the German maneuver, you could split up the problem of Tobruk from the eastern front: this question, in fact, after several indirect hints, was clearly placed on the carpet by General Rommel at the end of our interview. The General pointed out that the lack of appropriate Italians means, the same German units have always been so far also reserve Tobruk front and that as long as there will be a special that is intended solely to reserve against Tobruk, you cannot separate the two tasks; But even in this case, the existence of a single supply route and the danger that it may be cut by any action departing from Tobruk with the South, it would be good that the Commander of the Eastern Front had also employs in the siege the Corp. of Tobruk.

I answered the General Rommel that the creation of the Corp. of Tobruk has the aim of making it more effective and more dissolved-in training, operational and logistic-control action; and that, in any event, the situation and the needs of the moment will be the ones who will rule to achieve-if necessary-in the best possible way.

My reply, which did not want to mortgage the present nor the future, I was motivated by the opportunity to reconsider the complex and delicate question, to-reconstitution of the *Ariete* and *Trento* divisions, and the arrival-which I hope is very near-other G.U. from the Homeland, but I understand perfectly that it did not meet the General Rommel.

You have to say about it and frankly that, if also not expressed in words, the thought of the German command is what the 'real war' have made only its troops and that our you have brought a very modest contribution, and even this more imposed by circumstances not tried; any measure intended to subtract compatibility their direct and complete the conduct of actions cannot be liked to the command itself.

I suppose in his next outing to Berlin with General Rommel will represent the thing to the Führer.

I should add that during this interview I asked General Rommel if in case of an English attack of grand style-that give the opposite of Bardia- Sollum and Tobruk-, German aircraft would be able to tackle successfully the situation: but General Rommel gave no answer to this question; the 'turn' has only, stating that the 'success' would be ensured in any case from the value of its troops; This statement denoting him as a great and admirable faith in the army to his orders, but that leaves dormant one aspect-and certainly not last-the fight, especially reflects the opposite of Tobruk.

Spirit and picture of the troops.

Referring to the appreciations made by General Rommel on our General Officers, and I've already said to be shared by me in General, expose, now, my personal impressions, fruit of the visit made to units online.

The Division commanders were unanimous in refer that while junior officers, apart from a few exceptions, are performing well, though official complement from less can be said for the major and the captains recalled from leave; the latter, generally, are too old and, although inspired by goodwill and the spirit of sacrifice, without energy and adequate capacity for their task; the first learn to live up to their task, not least because almost everyone has reached such degrees as a result of subsequent promotions, based on short periods of service.

Is then unanimously complained about the fact that these officers, to almost all, arrive unprepared and therefore unfit to command or units suffering from congenital diseases, which is why, after a brief tenure must be removed for professional incompetence or ill health.

It is therefore necessary that the central authorities have implemented a professional selection of the officers to be sent to Cologne and a strict control of their physical qualities, so that here comes, in fact complement of officers, is the best I can offer the motherland; and that officers have the s.p.e. choosing and sending clear preponderance.

On my behalf I willing to enter online drives everything good can give the Cologne, officers and non-commissioned officers, including s.p.e. officers to be drawn from the 5th Army, without prejudice or limitation whatsoever, but with the unique vision to combat units the necessary solidity and operational capacity.

To support the need for careful choice of officers in Cologne and I, among others, the example of Colonel Bruno of 20th infantry regiment that, disregarding some of his moral conditions by himself without notes, he was sent to Cologne, just over a month away from the loss of a child, and from internment in an insane asylum for his wife, gone mad following the death of this son. And it's pretty easy to guess what was the performance of this officer who exercised the command of constant nervous crises, and is now in hospital awaiting repatriation.

The other issue that I was repeatedly proposed is that of troop fatigue, forced to live in the sand and bad colonial climate and excluded, at least so far, not only by the possibility of licensing rounds, but also by the possibility of adequate rest shifts online.

The difficulties of a regular rotation system are obvious ' and no one hides; but it is equally true that the infantry, use to reason with his simplistic reasoning, doesn't know that we cannot be persuaded to share among all the weight of marmarica, when the trench and known that in Italy there are elements of the younger classes not yet tried to hardship and sacrifices of the war.

Compatibility, just the issue of transport was initiated at a satisfactory solution, the change could be achieved by establishing a fixed time period of service in the colony, after which the return of the military should take place almost automatically locks proportionate to the force of individual units, so that the subtraction is not unaffected by the overall efficiency of departments. And then, the rebuilding could take place through-the «educational center» that this command has established a boat, which has already begun to operate, and which should flow perfectly framed and instructed the complements from Italy for a first phase of acclimatization.

To further strengthen the moral energies of the troop then

spread in Italy the idea of Libyan war, enhancing the symbolic value and highlighting that it is this sector that need to converge the best moral and material energies of the nation because, among other things, he fights with against a extremely fierce foe, and alongside German troops that are in high quality, military grade magnificent abundance of means and perfect organization.

However, from interviews with the troop I stretch the impression that, generally, the spirit is still high, and the purpose of balance 'sit tight': but we must not conceal that the hardships are great and that in the long run they may not have much influence on the physical spirit; the truth, though, you have to look at it, ungrateful and knowledgeable watch, open face.

Transport from the Motherland to Liba.

I mentioned earlier the issue of transport, because today is fundamental because the efficiency of Libya is intimately linked to the ability to transport from Motherland. Under current conditions, they, as is well known, are barely sufficient to supply the daily needs of the troops without ability not only to set up adequate stocks, but not to keep all the material efficiency, especially automotive, located in Libya.

This command, in accordance with the guidelines of E.V. each is carrying out activities to increase the possibilities of landing in ports of Tripoli and Benghazi and is studying the start-up of shipping to Derna and utilization of Bardia; but it is also essential that the central organs, have stepped up convoys escort from the Motherland so as to minimize losses for torpedoes fired from the sea or from the air; and that those aircraft don't leave ever discovered areas where air strikes can be carried out safely.

The availability of ports of Tunisia would help solve the nagging problem: but the question, pure essence of politics may be here simply remembered; in the absence of what has been requested above is, however, necessary that you think at least, to transport a regular service with submarines, aircraft and supplies from the Motherland, directly, the centers of Tripoli and Benghazi, for both internal supplies from Tripoli to Benghazi and Derna, in order to relieve the painful crisis auto transport that threatens to become more serious every day. Wouldn't this be a major contribution, and would not solve the crisis; However, if discretion to high quality materials, it would be, especially in this time of incalculable help: for this purpose, just remember the amount of vehicles, airplanes and artillery that is not possible, today, to repair due to the lack of spare parts, parts are often little weight and bulk.

Defensive organization.

The defensive organization of Tobruk and Sollum was designed and implemented by General Rommel, with the following criteria (...).

I found the topic of the defensive arrangement because by the way how it was organized appears even more evident, as I already mentioned, the tendency to employ our troops in pieces and which element destined for the less brilliant: support IE leaking water dripping on a daily basis in the unnerving trench dug into the environment sand and, in case of attack, leaving us the task of taking the blows done by the opponent for

allow the German divisions the brilliant job of maneuvering and eventual reconquest of the strongholds that have been overrun.

But the situation, for the moment, is not susceptible to significant changes, especially since the German command is not very inclined to accept them willingly, because by now accustomed to wider autonomy, autonomy which does not omit ever occasion to claim, and that will be well hard-dare I say impossible-quit.

Efficiency of the Italian divisions.

As I mentioned it is clear that our divisions, for the losses and the inadequacy of vehicles does not grant them the desired ability to maneuver, where space is the most against enemy of infantry, are far from their full efficiency.

But where the shortcomings are particularly feel is in terms of artillery. Almost all divisions have the artillery regiment consisting of only two groups and these are often on two batteries. For this reason all mobile artillery and of Corps and the Army until 105 caliber, have already been used to reinforce the troops in line; and, to meet the need quotas, it had to use therein even the *Bologna* division regiment which was on developing transformational in the Jabal.

I'm already replacing said artillery with regiment from Ga.F, and it is my intention to take this necessary materials to give to all divisional artillery regiments of the 3rd group and the third missing batteries; but my will clashes with, for the time being, in the face of an inability to provide necessary vehicles divisions for daily needs, without having to subtract from the Stewardship, which already pays to deal with all the complex needs and the needs of the units.

The enormous distances and the track Via Balbia- Acroma -el Adem-Via Balbia, 80 km long is reduced now to a real sandy flood have produced frightening gaps in truck units, while the ability to repair workshops is less than daily needs. With the implementation of the road that will replace the track really admirable work due to the tenacity of the gregarious and working companies, which will be completed-hopefully-to 15 of next month and that the German command has proposed taking the name of "Axis Road", the situation will be significantly improved, but other lorry imposing submission, absolutely.

Aviation.

I have already reported in part with the sheet 01/26/7 10769/941.

Conclusion.

Many, if not all, of the things of which I have mentioned in this report, are already known to your Excellency, and it is also known that in essence all they do for now to a question of transportation:

-transport by sea and by air from home to Libya; - transport, by air and car by sea landing zones in Libya to G.U. in the line.

However I felt it appropriate to remind her again and also in detail to provide to E.V. See a complete, accurate, and objective of the presented situation.

With regard to provisions different transport are underway, others are being studied, and this command will put any greater diligence and passion in addressing and solving many problems at this complex and delicate question connect. It seems no place, however, insist on the need for an even greater contribution on the part of the Navy and air force in particular, even at the cost of some eventual sacrifice.

About the military efficiency of our troops, it is what was represented here, with all objectivity and hoping more alive to increase in no long time.

As the spirit of the troops themselves, vain would hide a sense of unease, which are now subject to environmental conditions, is also inevitable comparison between surface abundant abundance of all kinds of which German units have-food including-and parsimony as they are forced. But even in this field are already in place provisions of various kinds in order to relieve any discomfort and material to elevate the moral; and the influx, already announced of new units will undoubtedly impact both in the immediate favorite material field as in the spiritual.

Overall it is given to affirm that the spirit of the troops is basically good: excellent in some units where the action of commanders capable, energetic and well taken, it makes more sense; and that is the determination to oppose any attempt to insult an enemy, steadfast faith in oneself and the hope to be able to go on the offensive as soon as possible, in order to avenge our dead and also demonstrate to our brave ally, that soldiers of Italy are no less of them in combat and win.

The General of the Army
Commander Superiore Armed forces A.S.
ETTORE BASTICO

COMANDO SUPREMO
THE CHIEF OF STAFF

5 AUGUST 1941 XIX

Excellency the General of the army E. Bastico
Comandante Superiore Armed Forces. I.N.A.

The negotiations for transport to Libya via Bizerte are for the moment your arena. We must therefore rely only on the streets of Tripoli and Benghazi whose performance is known, as they are known the risks to which they are exposed.

The capture of Tobruk cannot think for a long time, having also in mind that the big guns for this target were sunk and that the German command cannot for now be replaced.

France's attitude becomes more treacherous, so we have to be concerned, if not right away at least for the near future of French North Africa.

So if your stuff it is evident that we cannot think for now to one of our offensive from Cyrenaica to the East, map which corresponds to our present position in Cyrenaica.

It requires instead of considering the opponent's next attack against us.

The limitation of our transport currents has allowed us to strengthen the resistance of Cyrenaica to the extent that would be possible if a Biserta street there was opened as had been hoped. As I stated in my letter of 4 current, we're making and continue to make all efforts that are possible with regard to transport.

The result of these efforts will certainly to bring our Cologne to a defensive alignment is satisfactory. However, while the problem of Libyan border begins to look West and wants to be considered, to our eastern border deployment is not enough to tackle an enemy attack that was conducted with forces much greater than those in June.

In this case the mass mobile we have, having to serve as reserve for the front of Sollum for to Tobruk, they would remain available to nip the outreach that the enemy would not try with adequate forces.

Already in the 16 July Mussolini underlined the need to establish a set back and ready to tack this I insisted to my letter from the 4 current.

The transfer of our strength on this position would impose no doubt assuming above considered and this in order to shirk the bypass and see us at the same time with the forces collected and the mass of maneuver available to give battle on more favorable terms.

A study done by this command about the mechanism of such a move has led to the conclusion that it could not be carried out successfully under the pressure of the enemy. It follows that, wanting your fulfill

as it is necessary, it must be made in advance at the enemy offensive. And since, according to the information now agree, we must expect this offensive in September, it is concluded that the movement must be organized and performed during the month of August.

What you have:

1st This Command test mode and shift times to perform, having in mind that the eviction of the few warehouses and of non-combatants and not strictly necessary to the units must precede the movement of such units and be done so as not to give the enemy the feeling of how much you prepare.

2nd Since it is expected that the Gen. Rommel keep their addiction as the face of Sollum as Tobruk, the movement must be studied in full agreement with the General himself, which, according to the agreements already made, can be entrusted with the responsibility for the execution.

3rd the new position, already stated on the approximate line Derna-Mechili (longer Agedabia organization) and basted in advance with all items, including artillery. With the forces available, you can implement on this position a solid lineup with staggering deep, keeping the mobile mass for the maneuver, which is our essential purpose.

4th to line up so will be completed to determine whether motorized Division "Trieste", ongoing completion is scheduled for early September, cannot be left in. Tripolitania to constitute the first nucleus of the line westward. This command thinks that soon after you might provide on completion and the motorization of the Division "Sabratha" and this prior to the sending of other major complete units to Libya. On this point you will like to know the code I'm thinking command.

You must just mention that the success of this concentration of forces depends essentially from secret. No effort will be pointless to keep hidden from the enemy our maneuvers, until which will begin the movement of units. At this time will be the special important mass of maneuver that it is the essential task of protecting against enemy action, including that coming from Tobruk, orderly movement of our divisions up to the desired position on the wire.

Aviation intervention in this maneuver is studied and regulated by this Command with the agreements in force with the German Air Force Command.

The Chief of the General staff
CAVALLEIO

THE GENERAL GOVERNMENT OF LIBYA
COMANDO SUPERIORE ARMIES IN NORTH AFRICA
Staff

Friday, 11 August 8, 1941 XIX

NOTES ABOUT THE MEETING PLACE FROM 9.45 A.M. to 10.45 PRESENT SITUATION for
CONSIDERATION:

Ecc. Cavallero, head of General S.M.
Ecc. Bastico, Commander sup. A.S.I.
Ecc. Gambara, head of S.M. A.S.I.
Ecc. Is Missing, An Sup Commander. A.s.
General Fassi, Bureau Chief Op. C.S.

1.- Ecc. Cavallero pressed be purpose and common interest to thoroughly examine key aspects and issues related to initiate suitable measures to deal with, in the best possible way, both the present situation and the foreseeable future eventualities.

2.-Letter dated 28 July, Keitel:

Cavallero gives reading excellence, adding comments and considerations on the main points of it; especially about issues: strengthening defense against Sollum -Tobruk; capture Tobruk; transport for strengthening means and forces in Libya; back Ain Gazala-El Mechili.

3.-preliminary Conversation last night between Excellence Cavallero-Bastico-Gambara.

Ecc. Cavallero references and clarification and integration of it says:

- a) Ain Gazala position, as judged by Super A.S.I. and also from C.S. limited defensive capability and support, also is taken into account, to allow Rommel viewpoint being necessary to harmonize our views with those of the Germans, who have still to hand them the sole more efficient and mobile troops for its operation; However Super A.S.I. must always consider yet rearmost position of Gebel (Derna-Mechili El).
- b) etc. but adds to Cavallero idea of a set, to the West of Tobruk, with employment a static character, replacing the new concept (not from Rommel), a mass of mobile armored G.U. (motorized-Division *Trento* and *Ariete*, which has already Super A.S.I. implementing measures in area respectively Ain Gazala and Bena-El Mechili, to which will be added the coming from *Trieste* Italy between August and early September). This mass mobile will work as set; for his attitude and ability (if not equal to German armored divisions) to act in all directions, this group of divisions will obviously, through maneuver, the resistance of G.U advanced non-mobile.

This is essentially the same ideas of Super A.S.I.; and the excellence

Bastico-Gambara agree in concept of Ecc. Cavallero.

c) Commander of the mobile mass.

Ecc. Cavallero proposes Ecc. Bastico to entrust the said command Ecc. Gambara (which retains nevertheless his position of head of S.M. Super A.S.I. to continue on direct cooperation with Ecc. Bastico), both recognized as master of Ecc. Gambara and put alongside the General Rommel (Commander of the German maneuver) equivalent.

Ecc. Bastico agrees with the proposal of Ecc. Cavallero, as well as Ecc. Gambara, waves remains determined that the measure is certainly Executive.

d) Motorized Division *Trieste*.

Further to the above, Ecc. Cavallero recommends that as soon as the Division's parts will be landed in Tripoli (starting with 5 convoys in August and the remainder in early September), they are immediately transported to Cyrenaica without stopping them to Tripoli, aim to accelerate the Constitution in place by moving mass. So it is understood.

4.-Measures to accelerate as much as possible the number of means of strengthening.

Ecc. Cavallero have that tomorrow the not to participate in the reconnaissance General Fassi opposite Tobruk- Sollum (there will be the Ecc. Cavallero-Bastico, with V. Rintelen and Malaguti, General s. Chief S.M. Super A.S.I operations.) but remains at Super Command A.S.I. purpose *to examine together the tables prepared and for particular boarding priority also to send the subsequent sailings.*

5.- Tobruk problem.

Ecc. Cavallero pressed that maximum likelihood is that the expected British attack to happen before Tobruk may have been captured, so the situation will force us to face the British action on both sides of Sollum and Tobruk, as indeed by all deemed likely.

As a result, the capture of Tobruk is outside to what one sees in the current situation.

However, the question to be examined in *relation to forces and means*, both Italian and German, to prepare for the operation: consequent problem of tempo (rhythm of inflows from Italy that is always question transport).

Ecc. Cavallero gives charge to Gen. Fassi to confer here with Super A.S.I but already shows that, taking into account needs about 3 other divisions including one armored (maximum needs mentioned by Ecc. Bastico in last night's interview and meets Rommel's opinion with which will be done in a program scheduled for tomorrow or the day after meeting with him), will certainly take no less than three months for maritime transport (it will be very difficult to send in Libya more than a Division per month, although this can take place), so that ultimately, the operation will be made only to Tobruk January-February 1942. (Ecc. Gambara fully agrees).

6.-Strengthening Libya.

Ecc. Cavallero poses question convenience, limited possibility in relation to sea transport:.

a) to fully Enhance the great drive on site?

b) or give precedence to the influx in Libya other G.U. new and complete? (Which are available at home).

Ecc. Bastico expresses the opinion that for a) should *send only the complete and normal*, enough to maintain the efficiency of the units in site (their intended application of employment), while for b) *and at least until the capture of Tobruk* you should give precedence to the influx of new G.U.

7.-Constitution of Italian investment Corp of Tobruk command.

Ecc. Gambara refers to having spoken with Navarini from which General had insurance that has all the elements necessary to establish his Corp. command, that will be done starting from the current 9.

8.- Letter 4 August No. 30329-0 p. by S.E. Cavallero to Ecc. Bastico: not yet received to Ecc. Bastico.

Ecc. Cavallero gives Office copy reading (minutes included to below).

Ecc. Cavallero will remarks the main topics: disengagement from the offices and duties of static in s.p.e. and; returnees per license, which generally will no longer return to Libya (*provision of the Duce*) but replaced with new elements (accessories ready at home); the retracted position (laid down in chapter III this note) not static but dynamic character, etc.

9.-Dissolution V Army and XX Corp. (Tripolitania).

Ecc. Cavallero exposes convenience lighten Corp of Tripolitania to get availability other elements and means, Opinions agree about *immediate dissolution* convenience V Army Command (whose Commander Ecc. Campbell as his desired return).

You agree not to dissolve the XX Corp. (whose Commander Ecc. Spatocco as well want to return) that will turn into "*command of Tripolitania*" (as proposed by Ecc Gambara).

To assume Command of Tripolitania said the LL.EE. agree on the choice of Ecc. Vaghela (which to his seniority can receive at any time post of army commands) and about Ecc. Cavallero also strike off General. Magli Roma, to examine as a matter of urgency with the war Ministry and Superesercito prefer replacement Ecc. on the Armistice Commission.

Ecc. Bastico adds that much Ecc. Spatocco (XX Corp) as Ecc. Barbieri (X Corp) were affected by Libya and their effects therefore are both under slightly maimed.

About Ecc. Barbieri, see Choosing a new Commander X Corp

When will we know if Ecc. Barbieri will return or not.

Ecc. Cavallero asks Gambara a note (for il DUCE) about General Da Bona.

10.-Miscellaneous Matters.

Topics are briefly:

Ports, security, transport with motor sailer (Ecc. Cavallero says that we do not), Mas request by SuperAsi (Ecc. Cavallero communicates that you cannot join), strengthening existing torpedo workshops in Libya and SuperAsi agreements with Fiat, etc., on which arguments *Ecc. Gambara give notes to Gen. Fassi*.

Ecc. Cavallero clearance mentions from Libya into Italy of 10 thousand civilians, ordered by the Duce to easing supply needs. Must be made to repatriate all those who have the possibility to live in Italy.

11.-Question Rommel.

Ecc. Cavallero resumes defense argument to the East, confirming that Rommel continues to respond to the whole complex of Tobruk.

His mobile reserve-the two German divisions-and only for both sides of the Marmarica (Egyptian border), while the SuperAsi has a mobile reserve Gambarà.

Ecc. Bastico requests that in the next interview with the General Rommel is asked to clarify his operational intentions.

12.- Ecc. Cavallero concludes that fixed the aims to be achieved as soon as possible make everything possible to strengthen Cyrenaica lightening Tripolitania.

After the Ecc. Cavallero and Bastico have interview with Aymone-Cat, V Air Fleet Commander Libya.

THE GENERAL GOVERNMENT OF LIBYA
HIGHER COMMAND ARMIES IN NORTH AFRICA
Staff

On 8 August 1941

THE MINUTES CONCERNING THE ISSUES RAISED IN TODAY'S MEETING IN CYRENE,
AMONG OTHERS ECC. CAVALLERO AND BASTICO, PRESENT AS WELL AS ECC.
GAMBARA AND MANCA WITH GEN. VON RINTELEN AND GEN. FASSI.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Examined the current aspects of the situation, it is understood that the current arrangement is the consequence of a rapid advance made with watching the prosecution continues without delay, that it must for now be postponed.

We examine the conditions under which we would play our defense against the recurrence of an enemy attack from the East: in the current lineup, the mass of the two German armored divisions appears insufficient if the attack were to rule simultaneously from the East and from Tobruk.

It is understood that in order to give battle with this lineup you need another mobile reserve to use in coordinated action with the first.

I.

CONSTITUTION OF THE MOBILE RESERVE

Take into account the divisions «Trento», «Ariete», «Trieste». The «Trento Division» can be withdrawn immediately from the front and replaced with «Bologna». Agreements in this respect have already spoken with the German command. Completing it in trucks and other means can be done promptly. This Division has special training scheduled for a. s. plus one bersaglieri Regiment. You decide to leave said bersaglieri Regiment and assign them a L tank battalion that is available.

The Div. «Ariete» features of its three M. Tank battalions. The bersaglieri Regiment, under the command of Col. Montemurro, on East there under the command of General Rommel and will be retired after substitution with other elements. Certain technical deficiencies of the tanks are being deleted. Another 36 M, tanks in discrete terms, have been recovered and will be used if necessary for replacements.

The Supercomando A.S.I. is providing to arrange repairs and recoveries in the wake of the Division. The training will be completed.

The Div. «Trieste» flow into in Libya in early September and will be called upon to join this Corps of Maneuver.

The command of the Corps of Maneuver will be employed by Ecc. Gen. Gambara, who will retain his position as head of G.S. of Supercomando A.S.I.

Gen. Gambara communicates to have being staging a squadron of 24 jeeps of war booth suitable for all terrains, on each of which installs a 65/17 gun especially for anti-tank shot, and possibly for other tasks.

II.

SET BACK

The position according to Ain el Gazala jobs are already quite ahead. The position consists of a safety line and a position of strength. This position has the advantage of not being too far from Tobruk (about 50 km as the Crow flies). Has tactical requirements satisfactory. You decide to complete the arrangement.

It is well understood that the occupation of this back line might not be done under the pressure of the enemy.

Its use is therefore the hypothesis of a decision to offset budget that was taken in relation to the overall situation and the imminence of an attack clearly prevailing forces.

This interpretation was confirmed by Gen. von Rintelen, who plays in this sense the thought of Marshal Keitel about rear line function.

The presence of a mobile reserve would be necessary more than ever before, and also in this case, because a defensive line of this kind cannot be conceived except as a starting point for the maneuver.

The Supercomando A.S.I. will solicit completion and equipment of this position.

III.

CAPTURE OF TOBRUK

This remains the objective to be pursued as a prerequisite for future offensive shooting to Egypt.

To determine the time of beginning of capture is necessary to set:

1st-phase still needed to complete the influx of media, especially artillery and ammunition;

2nd -phase for the influx of forces still needed, that clarifies, also heard on Gen. Rommel, in at least one Armored Division and a normal type.

As regards the flow of materials, determination of the times will be based on agreement between the Supercomando A.S.I and the Rommel command.

For force, the timing will be determined by the Supreme Command remembered that, situation permitting to the demand, Tobruk's attack will be led by taking the necessary reinforcements from the mass mobile although had not yet completed the influx of new units.

IV.

DISMISSAL OF TRIPOLITANIA G.U COMMANDS

It is understood the opportunity to come to the dissolution of the 5th Army and the transformation of the XX Corp. Command into “*command of Tripolitania*” with attributions and competence on all troops stationed in Tripolitania.

The easing of the structure that will allow further recovery of personnel and means of Tripolitania in favor of Cyrenaica.

The Ecc. Cavallero and Bastico agree in choosing Ecc. Gem. Vecchiarelli for the new “*Command of Tripolitania*”.

V.

COMMAND OF THE TOBRUK - SOLLUM BATTLE

Given that the only mobile reserve current for the Tobruk- Sollum is still the German divisions, remains confirmed that Gen. Rommel continued to take command of all troops deployed in Marmarica (from Ain Gazala to the East) and the Egyptian border, and that even after the imminent Constitution of Corp Command to Tobruk (*).

The Chief of the General staff
The Superior Commander A.S.I.
The Chief of staff of A.S.I Supercomando.
The Gen. of Brig. Fassi-Secretary

(*) Everything is contained in this report has made the next object conversation with Gen. Rommel to Bardia on the afternoon of August 9-day present his Ecc Bastico and the Gen. von Rintelen.

Throughout the Gen. Rommel has proved fully agree.

MEMORANDUM PRESENTED BY MR. VALLETTA (FIAT)
TO THE COMANDO SUPREMO

Turin- June 12, 1941 XIX

REMINDER
CURRENT SITUATION INCLUDED TANKS

Quick Tanks L, 3 or L. 35.

In 1928, Minister of war Ecc. Cavallero, was examined, for the first time since the great war, the opportunity to study a type of quick, light tank that could carry out the task of exploring and accompanying Infantry

On indication of Ecc. Cavallero, technicians Automotive inspectors stopped the attention on the Carden Lloyd a few samples which were imported in Italy, and the Ansaldo was the eventual reproduction.

The results of the tests but the derived-need to design and build a tank that meets the needs of our armed forces and Ansaldo, a pledge of the automobile Inspectorate, came to an agreement with Fiat for the construction of the tank of 3 tons. named C.V. 3, and afterwards, to changes in the year 1935, L. 35.

These tanks were used, as it is known in Africa and Spain where the value and self-sacrifice of the tank crews, behaved, in relation to their ability, in brightest mode.

Tanks M. 11 and M. 13

Meaning the General staff to equip the armed forces of a heavier and more powerfully armed, was entrusted to Fiat and Ansaldo commissioned a study from 8 tons. oil engine which would be called breaking tank.

Was admitted on a confidential basis, depending upon the situation in Geneva, that the weight of the tank could get to 9 tons.

The sample was made in 1937 and the first order of 100 units was place in 1938 with a tank called called M. 11 for weight (11 tons) Meanwhile was detected the need to have the gun in turret and then the tank was varied as come to the accommodation type M. 13 whose weight is now 14,000 kg, but is often passed well and led to at least 15,000 kg. from troops in the area of operation.

Orders going to said about 1500 tank units for which 700 motor sets have already been built.

The current conflict erupted, from the Allied tanks. Enemy Nations and Germany emerged the need to equip the M. 13 by a more powerful engine that was created by modifying existing engines and completely

gaining greater power of about 20 HP. on 125 first provided by the engine.

Currently a tank M. 13 equipped with this engine is in the experiment in Rome at the Central Study motorize Viale Pinturicchio and assumes that the production of this new engine can occur with early next July.

Army Tank L.6

Fiat and Ansaldo in agreement, at the request of foreign Nations, were provided to the building on their own, and with the approval of the Military Authorities, a recon tank armed with a 20 mm gun and a heavy 8 mm. heavy machine gun in turret.

It was produced in 1939 the first specimen of L. 6 wagon after having undergone an examination of Military Authorities was found nearby and gave rise to a order of 583 tanks, reduced later to 283 to achieve on other units from 300 47/32 self-propelled.

The execution of this tank, whose speed was recently increased to 42 km/h, takes place entirely at the Spa establishments in order to be able to have in the war two distinct centers of production of tanks.

NEW STUDIES

Tanks from 25 tons.

In August 1940 it was envisaged at Fiat-Ansaldo the need to design and build a heavy tank about 25 tons. whose characteristics were definitely fixed in December 1940. This unit must be fitted with Naphtha engine 330 HP., armed with a 75 mm gun and auxiliary weapons and will be named P. 75.

This tanks designs have already been completed and experimental assemblies are under construction. It is expected that the engine will be put in the bench next month of July and that the sample may be ready by the end of October.

Tanks 18 tons.

In recent weeks the Fiat and Ansaldo, were affected by the Higher Inspectorate Teroici Services to the study of a medium-power tank by about 18 tons with petrol engine, fast and well armed, for the final setting of that Ecc. De Pigner is holding a one-day plenary meeting 16 corr. in Rome.

Meanwhile, Mr. Banerjee, Director of Spa (re construct as well as Establishment of military tanks, tank motorized L. 6 motor groups for the tank M 13), was affected by the German military authorities at the building, on behalf of themselves, of the suspension parts and assemblies of German tank No. 3 from about 18 tons and for which are underway with the possibility of rapid conclusion, negotiations.

Since then is the ability to build almost all mechanical units of the German tank No. 3 predicted, appeared the convenience to ask German authorities for the construction of complete wagon as a reminder, presented to the authorities themselves in the middle of R. Embassy, here attached.

If you take into account that the German command would hand over the materials because of 160%, it seems obvious the convenience to extend also to the Italian armed forces production of German tank No. 3 that corresponds in principle to the requirements that are required for the new design stays from 18 tones of which has been spoken above.

The fact you could handle:

- a) the raw materials;
 - b) construction drawings;
 - c) any technical assistance ready and interested German bodies;
 - d) commissioning of working through the production of parts destined for Germany;
 - e) all items supplied by German war experience;
 - j) ultimately all warranties to proceed to a rapid production, however always faster than solving the problem in any other way (foreign Licenses or new projects);
- consider taking serious and immediate consideration in the above proposed thesis.

CONCLUSION

The situation of the tanks came with the measures described above would be defined accordingly:

Reinforced Tank L. 6 (weight approx. 6.8 tons)-currently in production at the Spa with a maximum rate of about 65 units monthly, to be achieved by August p. v.

M. 13 tank-With increased engine; in production for the last 700 units of the order at the Spa and Ansaldo, with a rate of about 10 units per month.

Tank 18 tons. -Reproduction of the German tank No. 3. production of this tank could replace that of M. 13 (weight 15 tons around) just completed the preparations for production.

Tank from 25 tons, armed with 75 mm gun-can be produced after completion and testing of the specimen under construction.

Where, with the current need to increase in speed, the engine's power output is increased, it may be considered among other solutions, that the engine turbocharging that is now followed by the German Cases (e.g. junkers) and that too with us has been tested with favorable results first.

EXPOSED

It confirms the above the June 6, 1941 verbally from Mr. Bono and comm. Bonelli in conversation with Mr. Colonel Schrotter about Fiat to build a full tank. Given the common interests of Italian-German war and in relation to availability of establishments Fiat,

arranged to perform complete drive, you can play that that concerned both Panzerkampfwagen complete the Germanic forces Italian (e.g. Tank No. 3 and no. 4). In this way the Fiat production would be at the disposal of the German *Oberkommando* and Italian armed forces, and Fiat's factories could work both to complement the German production that simultaneously to the Italian armed forces.

If the O.K.W. recognized in this production of a Germanic complete unit at Fiat a realization of that agreement in the next beginning production at Fiat engine workshops D.B. 605, Fiat would be willing to make known, after its Government approvals, at O.K.W. their accomplishments of military vehicles (artillery tractors, military vehicles for use in Cologne, tanks, armored military tanks, machine guns and special troops or materials) by granting possibly playing in Germany of that or those of its planning and construction that may interest O.K. W predicted.

AGREEMENTS ON THE USE OF ITALIAN AND GERMAN AIR FORCES IN THE CENTRAL-EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN AND ADJACENT TERRITORIES

18 July 1941 XIX

Introduction

The Italian-German cooperation is based on the following fundamental concepts:

- a) There must be a unity of action and address the use of Italian and German air forces, in view of the common purpose to be achieved;
- b) it is convenient to divide the tasks of the two allied air forces, according to the magnitude of the forces deployed and the characteristics of their respective aircraft, in order to obtain the maximum performance of the available resources;
- c) is not appropriate to come to creating mixed (including Italian and Germanic units) for organic reasons, logistical and operational.

1. cooperation on sea

In the sector of operation) respectively allocated to R. Aeronautica and the Reich air force with regard to maritime exploration is bounded by line joining Cape Matapan-Derna. This demarcation line should not be regarded as a condition of absolute Division and may be exceeded, should the need arise, both from Italian reconnaissance eastwards from the German reconnaissance westward.

- b) The results of reconnaissance, both Italian and Germanic, shall be brought immediately to the attention of every Italian and Germanic commands concerned.
- c) Exploration and actions by naval forces attack and against convoys, howsoever recorded, may be carried out by any air force, both Italian and Germanic, at short notice, giving each other to communication concerned.
- d) Air protection of maritime traffic (Commons, anti-aerial torpedo and antisubmarine hunting) and along the African coasts remains wholly entrusted to the Italian air force.
- e) Their traffic protection between Greece and Crete is made by German Navy Command Greece.

2. Cooperation in the Aegean

- a) The German tenth Air Force and aeronautics of the Aegean will exchange information daily operational intentions against land targets in the eastern part of the Mediterranean (Cyprus, Palestine, Transjordan, Egypt). For reconnaissance on Alexandria just a notice (possibly the previous evening).
- b) Aegean Aviation will continue to receive orders and directives from Superaereo

and will adhere, as far as possible to any request of the X Corps command.

c) In principle the coordinated actions of hunting and bombing will be carried out by X Corps and the Aegean Aviation, each with their own units.

d) In the case of important contemporary actions against the same target, the command of X Corps would provide details about the timing and allocation of operating segment and the Aegean Aviation link his actions to those of Germanic command.

e) All operational communications between the Aegean Air and X Corps will be made through the German liaison officer in the Aegean with German ciphers.

f) With the successful occupation of Crete and taking account of the limited ability of Italian Aegean Islands airport logistics, is to exclude that air units are located in Aegean Germanic. Clearances that air units will support on Germanic of the Aegean to carry out special missions. It is necessary that these actions are limited to the minimum possible.

3. Cooperation in North Africa.

a) North Africa is considered as common operation sector. Against the objectives of Alexandria-Cairo-Suez Canal, will operate normally the German X Corps. Shares of R. Aeronautica will be given above the 10th German Air Corps, which will ask for the suspension should impede Germanic operations.

b) Bomber action against Alexandria-Cairo-Suez Canal and against maritime targets are ordered by Superaereo. The German Liaison Office at the R. A. shall be informed before (see figure a. 3)

c) All other operations in North Africa, which will be carried out by «advanced units», will be coordinated by *Fliegerführer Afrika* with those of Germanic units. The «Advanced Unit» of Command. -that-will be dependent on- for all purposes by the 5th Air-Crew has freedom to set and manage air operations of their units, on the basis of requests and directives of *Fliegerführer Afrika*.

4. Cooperation in Sicily

a) The same form of cooperation envisaged between the Aegean Air and the X Corps will be applied for the German X Corps units that will be sent back to Sicily, which subordinate their operations to those ordered by the Italian Superaereo and join Superaereo requests as far as possible.

b) In Sicily remain available airports of Catania and Gerbini airfield for aircraft that have to stop for German supplies. A new location of Germanic units on those fields can be carried out with 48 hours notice. Superaereo shall take the necessary measures to make room for German units. Any requests for other German airports in Sicily, as well as the

two above mentioned, will be examined by Superaereo, which reserves the right to decide according to the situation.

5. Air defense and Counter-aircraft in Greece

a) Superaereo will make at the disposal of X Corps a hunting group on Mc. 200 for protection of offensive reconnaissance and bombing within the limits of autonomy of the aircraft.

b) Superaereo will locate a fighter squadron for the defense of Athens-Piraeus-Salamis and another squadron in Peloponnesus to escort convoys that will be judged important to Supermarina.

These two squadrons will remain under Italian command.

c) A/A protection of ports of unloading in Greek territory, occupied by Italian troops, Superaereo will represent the Supreme Command need to be provided with A/A units in Italy.

6. Collaboration between Superaereo and X Corps

a) The X Corps communicate, through the Superaereo Liaison Office the results of the use, as well as operational intentions if it is expected that these activities will be carried out in cooperation with the air force to Sicily and North Africa.

b) Superaereo for its part held the X Corps, through liaison office, as so far, on the situation in the Western and Central Mediterranean and will inform Supermarina than the Eastern Mediterranean, which is clear from the reports of the X Corps.

7. Superaereo Information service-X Corp-Aegean Air

a) information on measures and those carried out by the X Corps, come, as so far, by t.s. (via Berlin or Vienna) and in cases of special urgency for German Office roentgenogram of connection to the transmission, with the most rapid means available, respectively at Superaereo or German X Air Corps.

c) Information on measures and those carried out by *Fliegerführer Afrika* are intercepted by r.t. station from the Liaison Office at the r.a. in Rome (in case of interruptions from the stations of Naples or Catania). Warn Superaereo Liaison Office about it.

d) At the X Corps will be deployed a Liaison Office of r.a., with functions of connection between X CAT and Aegean Aviation. This Office will have a r.t. Center of R. Aeronautica.

e) it is important that sightings made by German reconnaissance become aware, surely and quickly, Aegean air. In order to achieve the security and rapidity, the r.t. Center available to the liaison officer at the X CAT will transmit signals from German M wave discovery of the Aegean.

f) Liaison Office at the X Corps eventually will send, by means of its r.t. Center, information on measures and those carried out by the X Corps: the air force Rhodes; the 5th Air Fleet; the air force of Sicily; at Superaereo. This between X Corp and Italian Aeronautical Authorities is only a reserve as there is already a direct connection between X Corps and the in the: Authorities and the reprehensive German Liaison Office Aeronautics Rhodes; Part of the X CAT command in Libya; germanica r. t. station of Catania; German Liaison Office at the Superaereo. In order not to provide in addition to decryption service enemy, that traffic will be carried out with the consent of the X CAT.

g) Italian surveys results are intercepted from r.t. of Marisudest, in Athens. The Marisudest command after deciphering and translation into German, delivers them to the German Admiral's Office in Athens (German Admiral and Marisudest have the same venue). German Admiral with own r.t. connection passes them to X Corps.

h) German reconnaissance results are sent by the X Corps at German Admiral in Athens that delivers them to the Marisudest Command, which, after translation into Italian and encryption, transmits them to air, by means of its r.t. Center

It is possible the simultaneous receipt of all fixed and mobile r.t. of the R. Marina and large command air units involved, making listening in the wake of the discovery.

*The head of the German Office of connection at the S.M. of r.
Aeronautics*

GEN. DIV. MAX RITTER VON POHL

p. the Chief of staff of the air force
GEN. SQ.A. G. SANTORO.

SUPREME COMMAND
THE DEPARTMENT

On 5 JULY 1941

AIR PROTECTION FAST CONVOYS
ON ROUTES TO THE EAST OF MALTA

On the morning of July 4, the Office operations, presided over by General Grandin convened a Commission to examine the following topics:

- 1) Eastern routes of convoys to Malta to Tripoli;
- 2) current possibilities of aerial escort for predicted convoys;
- 3) mode and possibility of increasing these escort.

The meeting was attended by:
for Supermarina

Rear-Admiral Ferreri
Cap. di Vascello Bedeschi

for Superaereo

Col. A.A. r.n. Biani
Cap. di Fregata Pucci Boncampi
Cap. di Vascello Marcatili's

An examination of the current situation of the Central Mediterranean basin has emerged as the routes to Tripoli, which is followed by convoys to the West of Malta, whether for a long stretch North and South of Pantelleria, forced by tight limits, due to the presence of large areas mined by us. It is very likely that the limited free sea stretch of water have been identified by English reconnaissance which in recent days has followed with particular insistence that convoys on routes so they will move.

Given the proximity of Malta to the West, these routes, with shorter, are considered more dangerous to the action of the bombardment and the Z.1007bis crew, because neither the fighters (which on the other hand does not have the necessary autonomy to a full-stock range 85 miles) anti-aircraft artillery, do with their action have produced effective results, to ensure sufficient safety in transport.

Such conditions have recently recommended the adoption of the routes to the East of Malta for fast convoy: his load of troops constituted a particular element value.

This convoy, departed from Taranto in advanced afternoon (probably his presence in the port of Taranto had been revealed by English reconnaissance) followed the first part a route for SSE, SSW, then up to a height of Misurata, then to the West. These routes were holding the convoy at a distance not less than 200 miles of Malta, holding enough distance to make difficult the use of British bombers, insufficient autonomy. Moreover, it is noted that if the new British torpedo bombers are Bristol Blenheim, their autonomy will be significantly increased.

The convoy in question was constantly watched by English reconnaissance in second day of navigation; on the morning of the third day, en route to Tripoli landing within walking distance from the arrival, was bombed without effect.

Followed by convoy routes allow aerial fighter escort only in the first part (near Taranto) and in the final stretch, when they cross the zone of action of fighter squadrons of Misurata and Tripoli. The length of the routes travelled was about 730 miles, the time taken was 43 hours at a speed of 17 knots.

The disadvantage of this route is that it leaves the convoy out of the reach of fighter aircraft for the duration of the second day daytime navigation.

Therefore, assuming they can lodge fighter squadrons at Araxos (Cape Papas) and Kalamata (Morea) and Benghazi, have examined other routes shifted even more toward East which, to the advantage of greater distance from Malta copulated simply more effective protection of fighter aircraft, departing from the points mentioned.

The disadvantage of these routes is more trail, i.e. a greater time of the convoy at sea.

Given the hours of day and night navigation, you're pretty much as a fighter squadron stationed in Benghazi would not bring significant benefit; It is found that a departing convoy from Taranto and Brindisi to 17 hours of day X with approximately SSE oriented route, at a distance of about 40 miles from the Islands and Jonie from Morea, and height of the 20° E Meridian and about for SW up to take a course to the West over Tripoli, could be scalded by fighter aircraft of Lecce from departure until sunset of the day X, Araxos and fighters of Kalamata from dawn of day X + 1 up to the limit of the possibilities (1/2 day for the Italian fighter; until sunset for the German fighter eventually deployed to Kalamata), from fighters of Misurata and for Tripoli from dawn on day X + 2 up on arrival in Tripoli, that would be about 15: 00 the same day. The path is approximately 770 mg; his lasting about 46 hours.

These routes, which should be at little followed in the return journey are beneficial as long as you can locate two Italian fighter squadrons, one at Araxos and another to Kalamata; or two squadrons of heavy fighter (Me 110) in Germany, both in Kalamata (given their greater autonomy).

Conclusion.

-the abovementioned route seems the most recommendable. However, we must examine the possibility of setting up two fighter squadrons, one for each at Araxos, Kalamata;

-for the latter you could ask German aviation a group or at least a heavy Fighter Squadron (Me 110). It seems that such a request may be made to the German air force in Exchange for the our request is for a fighter squadron at Araxos (which does not identify with that reported as required) for the sheet into the Gulf of Patras, two squadrons of fighter "for the protection of Athens and the hunting group in Candia, whose base will be ready in October.

The meeting also highlighted the need to maintain a tighter secrecy on departures of convoys; could be also studied the possibility of embarking on multiple ports (Taranto, Brindisi, Bari) with the meeting at sea, in order to give less in the eye.

* * *

It would be helpful and recommended the relocation of a maritime reconnaissance squadron (C.Z. 506). South for the exploration of the waters in the Strait of Crete in order to ensure, within the limits of the possible, coming from the Levant, interesting days transit of convoys. To do this we need to make arrangements with the X C.A.T. to change existing ones, stating just fine that the purpose of the flight is fast convoys, protection of which also benefit from German troops.

* * *

It is important that, in anticipation of convoys for Libya, are carried out aerial Reconnaissance on Malta in order to ascertain the presence in that base units of the war. If their absence is recorded, you can count on hands of a Cruiser Division to the Commons and take advantage of the Destroyers assigned to the same Division to reinforce the escort ships of the convoy.

* * *

For slow convoys (material) the solution of the route East of Malta cannot be adopted because the crossings will last about 4 days and for a long time outside of aviation security. For such convoys there is that the Western route, in order to strengthen the defense of anti-aircraft artillery on board ships, and as far as possible, the naval and air reserves.

* * *

An examination of the situation increasingly makes clear the dangerous function of Malta as a valid item contrast on our vital communications with Libya. The problem of these communications can be fully resolved only with the employment of Malta. Such action, huge and very complete mole, could not be supported by our own means, and naval aircraft. However, it appears necessary to stock recovery opinion on Malta, now in sharp decline, as results from the attached graph: and these actions should be organized into full membership in the movement of convoys.

For the pre-eminent shipping interests with Libya, which alone can enable us to preserve efficiency defending forces that theater, it became imperative that continue to be polarized on these transport every activity of our naval forces and that they are not diverted the air force intended for their protection, forces that, indeed, should be increased.

Note. -By Superaereo was ordered a survey at Kalamata to recognize the possibilities of the field that was in preparation.

GENERAL GOVERNMENT OF LIBYA
COMANDO SUPERIORE ARMIES IN NORTH AFRICA
General Staff

N. 0.1/prot 17550. Op.

P.M. 11 on, 26 OCTOBER 1941

Reply to-n. 30743 op. 20 current Dog's annexed: No. 1 paper to 50,000 of Tobruk
TOPIC: PROJECT ATTACK TOBRUK

TO THE COMANDO SUPREMO
OFF. Operations- AFRICAN THEATER
MILITARY MAIL 21

As is well known to this Supreme Command, the action for the capture of Tobruk was put into action by the Command of Panzergruppe Afrika, responsible for the whole sector of Marmarica.

It donated the drafting of the plan of attack; project which doesn't seem yet defined.

In a series of meetings, General Rommel extensively dealt with the various issues related to the action; from time to time, however, General Rommel has announced substantial changes to what was said in the previous meetings, which suggests that many details are not yet well defined.

The command of Panzergruppe will be requested to submit a complete plan he wrote; in the meantime you indicate here, in summary, the guidelines of the project which appeared in on designated meetings, the last of which took place on the 20th current month.

I. Constitution of the mass attack.

-15th German Armored Division;

-German Division, partially motorized formation (Constitution still does not note);

-Division “*Pavia*”, removed from the investment of Tobruk and replaced by “*Trento*”, which garrisoned the area of Ras Medauuar already held by two German battalions.;

-Division “*Bologna*”, which will be partially removed from the investment of Tobruk “towards the November 20” -and replaced, only in advanced strongpoints, with particular, German and Italian elements.

-about 500 cannons, all in very advanced deployment.

II.-Era.

Not yet defined. At its meeting on 20 October the General Rommel has

given the divisions, as the time available for training, "about 4 weeks yet."

III.-*Action Concept.*

Penetrate deeply into the opponent deployment with direction S. E.-N.W. and eliminate promptly the enemy that is East of the flaw to have one wing resting on the sea; reached the Fort Airenti diverge the attack simultaneously on Tobruk and Ras Belgàmel.

IV.- *The direction of attack:* blockhouse R. 69-Sidi Mahmud crossroad-Fort Airenti. Fort Airenti a column march on Tobruk; other on Ras Belgàrnel.

V. - *Attack Front:* between blockhouse R. 55 (West) and via Balbia-Sidi Daoud (to the East).

VI. - *Objectives:*

- a) Sidi Mahmud crossroad, to reach by 12 hours of day X;
- b) Tobruk, to reach for the evening of day X;
- c) Ras Belgàmel, same day access X or in the morning of day X + 1.

VII.-*The attacking Columns:*

- to the left of the direction of attack Italian divisions;
- right German ones.

VIII.-simultaneous Actions:

- the "Trento" must occupy forts R. 11-13 and R. Sidi Cheiralla;
- the «Brescia», after intense artillery fire and clouding, will attack to give the enemy the impression that the ruling in the West.

IX.-*Mode:*

- in the afternoon of day X-the intense action of counter-battery and an smoke screen in the Western sector ("Brescia" Division) to attract from the opponent's attention;
- artillery preparation, immediately before the attack, lasting about 3 hours;
- hand that the attack will proceed, the Italian divisions must ensure the left side creating the particular strengths of the company quickly; German ones will try to quickly eliminate opposing troops deployed to the East to the sea;

-each Division striker should have 4 groups the att. to move forward quickly; other artillery will be moved forward just reached the objective *a*);

-If, achieved the objectives a), b), c). the enemy lined up in the West of the fort still resist, will be eliminated with action to reverse and with powerful artillery action;

-If you fail to pass the line of forts across the front of attack, is expected to channel all attacking mass where loopholes will be produced.

NOTE

The attack will be led by an Italian Corps (the XXI) under the orders of General Navarini and a German corps under the orders of General Crüwell, both will be under the command of General Rommel.

Each Corp. has a mass of artillery under the command of Commander art. of the XXI Corp.; and the artillery commander C.T.A. the action of two masses of artillery will be coordinated by the Commander of the artillery Panzergruppe Afrika (General Boettcher).

General Rommel also said that, if achieved goals (24 or 48 hours at most), the enemy lined up in the West should resist again and at the same time-you make a threat on the front of Sollum, would think to liquidate Tobruk with artillery fire (plus, it implies, with the Italian divisions) and run with the “armored divisions” to the East (from this sentence suggests that maybe the General Rommel believed to employ possibly on the front of Tobruk, both, the German armored divisions, not just the 15th).

In The Meantime:

-the attack troops carry out intense training in night hours;

-the officers perform many reconnaissance;

-online units await the removal of outdated minefields in the overhang night on day 11 c.m. and recovery of strengthening materials that will be used later.

Also busily building proceeds of pitches, the deployment of artillery and the services, the Constitution of depots, supplies, etc.

FRONT OF SOLLUM

To deal with any contemporary enemy threats on the front of Sollum our action on Tobruk, is scheduled for now:

-a reserve of Panzergruppe Afrika formed by the German 21st armored Division is expected to be placed in the South East of Gambut;

-a reserve of Comando Superiore made up of Italian AC which *currently* has divisions located: “Ariete”- at Bir Hakeim. “Trieste”, at Gadd el Hamar; but that will be moved to appropriate time respectively

On permanent placement of the reserves and the coordination of their action has not been taken yet definitive agreements.

Will be formalized as soon as possible and this communication will be given Comando Supremo.

by order of
The General C. A. Chief of staff
G. GAMBARA

GENERAL GOVERNMENT OF LIBYA
COMANDO SUPERIORE ARMIES IN NORTH AFRICA
General Staff

N. 01/18865 of prot. Op.

P.M. 11, ON 11 NOV. 1941-A. XX

SUBJECT: OFFENSIVE ACTION FOR THE CAPTURE OF TOBRUK

*To the Comando Supremo
for Excellence Cavallero*

Rome

Preparing for the action of Tobruk proceeded briskly under projects formulated at the time: it can be considered almost finished. By this Comando Superiore each and every possible facilitation competition was given that it was complete and urges.

With movements being implemented (cf. 01/29 October's 17904) and which will be completed within the current 15, is also implemented the planned deployment of G.U. of maneuver to deal with a *possible* enemy action on simultaneously to our offensive Sollum on the front of Tobruk.

Such an eventuality (considered the worst for us) led already to consider necessary on the theatre of operations, the availability of another, the armored Division "Littorio".

This Comando Superiore, perfectly conscious of the inadequate transport capacity to meet the normal requirements of life and activity of the units here exist, did not pressure for sending such a Division; It felt rather than facilitate the solution of the problem, obtaining, with direct agreements, to surrender, to the action of Tobruk, one motorized Division needed.

This place, it is appropriate to now consider on a concrete floor and our real possibilities in relation to the expected opposing reaction.

It is obvious that the contemporaneity of the two actions (our on Tobruk; the enemy on Sollum) would represent for us the worst case and then, within the limits of expected to be avoided.

Such an eventuality was placed on the scale, and in the event that you experience *sudden and unpredictable*, were taken all possible measures.

It is easily assessable these measures are just sufficient to cope with a limited-range enemy action and having the content in order to distract law enforcement attack on Tobruk (a distraction).

However, if the opposing action on the Sollum tends to distant objectives and would conduct with adequate forces to achieve decisive results, the contemporary of the two actions would put us into a crisis that from which it might be extremely difficult to get out of it in a situation still bearable.

The preparation of the opponent, which is from all sources, suggests that it is now ready for an action in a big way and that wait just the beginning of our attack on Tobruk for having facilitated his task.

The signs of his extensive and complete preparation are:

- increase of forces in the Western Desert (evaluated in six divisions of power and much higher on our armament, plus six or seven exploring groupings);
- strong concentrations of units in Siwa Oasis and expeditious Giarabub; -significant increase and intense movement of vehicles more than doubled in a short period of time;
- construction of a railway line from Marsa Matruh Bir Abu Kilab with offshoot from Bir Abu Tunis up to Bir el Halaq and ongoing work for extension westward the two trunks;
- creation of advanced depots in directions Giarabub-Gialo and Giarabub-Mechili;
- intense activity of motorized scanning units that consistently beat the OASIS Gialo-Marada and push up on the Balbia;
- thickening of the airfields and substantial increase of its aircraft (36 fighter squadrons and approximately 20 bomber squadrons);
- broadcast traffic controlled by us and partly intercepted.

This confirms what has been possible to know from interrogation of recently captured prisoners, including officers of the S.I. English and numerous other information which come frequently from this Comando Supremo and S.I.M.

In contrast, our situation can be summarized:

- efficient only on the front side of Tobruk and on the eastern front; However, the absence of reserves;
- inability to counter the opposing *gebelico* in searching and in the area of the OASIS;
- insufficient defense of quadrilateral Ajdabiya-Gialo-Marada-el Agheila and inability to counter an enemy advance in this direction;
- semblance of coastal coverage which is not efficient nor the supervision;
- inadequacy of vehicles just as soon as the required life of units in normal activity.
- absence of diesel and aviation gasoline.
- inadequacy of food stocks, Ammo, etc.;
- supplies from Mainland reduced to purely random chance;
- great shortage of means for anti-aircraft defense.
- great inferiority in aviation especially from hunting.

Given this situation and given that looks like very probable the occurrence for us the two most costly and difficult conditions, namely:

- enemy action not only recreational but in style and with appropriate means to pursue decisive objectives;
- with our contemporaneity action on Tobruk;
- opens to this Comando Supremo -for the decision-the opportunity to undergo new examination the era in which the action may be undertaken for the conquest of Tobruk. .

The General of the army
Comandante Superiore FF.AA.A.S.
ETTORE BASTICO

COMANDO SUPREMO
THE HEAD OF G.S.GENERAL
AS for DUCE

13 NOVEMBER 1941 XX

As yourself, Duce, you mentioned this morning, you must fulfill as soon as an act of energy, which breaks the hypnotic state in which might arrive without this reaction, the recent events on the sea.

I have therefore proposed since this morning in the Adm. Riccardi this question:

"If, aware that we in Naples a convoy of six ships already loaded, all with speed of 14 miles, you can insert it on the route to Tripoli with ultra powerful escort, taking advantage of the fact that the enemy did not expect our so ready and that one of the British cruisers of Malta is almost certainly damaged".

From the interview with the Ecc. Riccardi and other later that I had with the Adm. Sansonetti, already aware of the matter, it turned out that this possibility exists, in the sense that, under these conditions, the convoy with enough expectations to lead the enterprise successful. Contribute to the success of the readiness of the reaction, the speed of the convoy, the power of the escort.

With regard to the escort, Adm. Riccardi would have limitations to three cruisers and similarly Adm. Sansonetti; essential objection naphtha consumption. But I persuaded both the need to ensure a safety margin and thus to assign to two naval divisions.

Adm. Sansonetti has also pointed out that, by adopting, as it seems necessary, the Eastern route that is safe from enemy torpedo bombers, the danger of the latter would remain, however, for the last part of the route to Tripoli. However, after my objections, Adm. Sansonetti agreed that the movement may be building so that this dangerous path for May part of the day.

In summary, the findings of Supermarina about question submitted has been positive, in the sense that this naval operation to transfer all or part of the convoy to Naples can and should be done.

Of course, even the use of submersibles around Malta shall be made with the concept of mass.

The Adm. Sansonetti said that the convoy would include an oil tanker which is in Genoa and which is the only one that has speed of 14 miles. This place, the convoy could be ready to start within the day 18th current.

Thinks that the convoy Supermarina, could be launched on Tripoli four ships, with six, plus the tanker; of these five boats, a that has the speed of 17 miles, would go only to the Western route, escorted by two destroyers; the other three, plus the tanker, should be for the Eastern route accompanied by two naval divisions plus the direct escort.

This is a real naval action, where the aviation cooperation would have important part:

1st -like preventive bombardment of Valletta and Malta Airport;

2nd - like reconnaissance;

3rd -like protection.

I have given on this topic with the Ecc. Pricolo which has outlined the take from Libya for the period of the operation of a squadron of 12 picchiatelli (*Stuka*) that could be returned immediately after the operation. The thing is possible, also heard the General Rommel from which picchiatelli depend. His Ecc. Pricolo also said it could provide a small number of S 84 with 1,000 kg bombs. However I have confirmed that the mass with all means available from other areas, but this time the air force needs to develop non-petty, but proportioned power in order to hit the mark.

The program of aero-naval cooperation is being studied by the Amm. Fioravanzo and General Cappa and you will have tomorrow morning conclusions. Tomorrow will be the final Conference with the Amm. Riccardi and with General Pricolo to fix the terms of the transaction, according to the program that will be submitted to your approval.

UGO CAVALLERO

ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE PROTECTION OF CONVOYS (*)

The day October 27, 1941 XX Chief of the G.S. General, in an interview with his Ecc. Pricolo, finds that, contrary to his directive, as these has prepared about Malta Air actions results in disruptive actions done piecemeal and diluted over time.

His Ecc. Pricolo objects that, with regard to counter enemy offenses during the travels of our convoys and that having these several a month, lasting several days each, aviation cannot act in mass.

His Ecc. Chief of the G.S. General observes that one must always strive for mass and, in summary, the goal of the mass itself is to deter wrongdoing when the convoys through the most dangerous and, therefore, that it is a single night throughout the course of each convoy.

On 3 November the Chief of the G.S. General, at a meeting attended by the Chief and Vice Chief of S.M.R.E., the Chief and Vice Chief S.M. R.M. and Sub-chief S.M.R.A., examines the issue of transport for A.S.I. and provided preventive action on Malta.

On 4 November the Chief of the G. S. General convenes Adm. Riccardi, the Commandant and Colonel Giosi Gallo. They shall carry out a thorough examination of all routes, taking into account for each of them the possibility of protection, and based on the autonomy of the naval and air means it came to choosing a route that passes at a distance from Malta that our torpedo bombers can intervene in favor of convoys, if they were attacked by enemy surface units, for a distance of 200 miles, autonomy without fear of opposing fighter attack from Malta, because out of its range.

On 5 November the Chief of the G. S. General convenes his Ecc. Santoro and informs him of the imminent departure of a convoy. They communicate route and gives security directives. Specifically states that the air force of the Sicily must hold themselves ready to intervene with a mass of torpedo bombers to act against opposing surface forces of the event, during their eventual return to Malta.

On day of 9 November 8.30 a.m. Chief of the G. S. General, having had the news of an enemy attack to one of our convoy, telephones Ecc. Santoro ordered to make the mass with all planes available for enforcement action.

November 10, 1941

(*) Precisely done prepare by Cavallero for MUSSOLINI.

COMANDO SUPREMO
THE CHIEF OF THE G.S. GENERAL
FOR IL DUCE

10 NOVEMBER 1941

The situation in Cyrenaica was, as you know Duce, subject of the most careful and continuous care of the Comando Supremo, as shown by yourself several times repeated. It is considered not only the action for the capture of Tobruk, but also the possibility of a hostile initiative to prevent this operation.

One of the main problems in this field was that of aviation. The entry online of Macchi 202 we are allowed to have in North Africa a prevailing fighter with all the possibilities that arise from such a prevalence.

A) – On *11 October*, General Pricolo just returned from his trip to Germany, taking with him the examining of this issue and invited him to arrange sending into Cyrenaica of a M 202 fighter groups, which he assured me be prepared within a very short term. On this occasion I was present at General Pricolo which, while remaining firm our arrangements for the timely attack on Tobruk, all our arrangements regarding the Cyrenaica had assumed of the imminence of an enemy initiative was or not confirmed by the information. I was very explicit on this point and the same General Pricolo I repeats verbatim my concept saying to agree. To make General Pricolo soon I proposed to send to Cirenaica the M 202 concentrated in Sicily, although this led to break the unity of the Wing which this group belonged.

B) – On *October 14* I had with General Pricolo a new interview on the same topic and asked him what was the departure of the Macchi 202 from Sicily. I answered General Pricolo that the ready availability of a group of the 1st Wing, wing designed to go to Cyrenaica, the dispensed by rely on the groups of Sicily. To add that the first group of 1st Wing was ready on October 20 and the 2nd on the 27th of the same month. Expressed to General Pricolo my regret for the delay, but accepting his proposed solutions.

C) – On *17 October* I received general Pricolo and General Marchesi, the latter departing for Libya.

Adjacent to both my predictions about the imminent enemy attack in Cyrenaica and the requirements for which had insisted on a ready reinforcement of our aviation N.A., in the first half, with fighter units.

D) – On *21 October* Sent to General Pricolo the following letter:

"In relation to the conversation already had I want to, on the occasion of your visit in Cyrenaica, examine the possibility of an emergency temporary reinforcement of the fifth air fleet, not only for sending already being fighter units, but also for bombing and reconnaissance aircraft, everything in relation to the planned operation on Tobruk".

E) – 22 October, in a new interview with General Pricolo on topic, the group displays the symptoms of an imminent enemy offensive in Cyrenaica and the proposed again the urgent need to strengthen our aviation in Libya, primarily fighters.

F)-23 October, in a meeting with Admiral Riccardi and with General Pricolo repeated my predictions about the next enemy offensive in Cyrenaica and confirmed myself orders for first sending a fighter group, regretting the prolonged delay now (the first group that was supposed to be ready, the 20th was not yet on track); General Pricolo told me to keep ready in Brindisi, for sending to Libya, also a group Cant 1007 and he insisted that I would strive to prepare the necessary fuel supplies.

G) - 30 October, I went to the Airport of Ciampino South, where I was met by General Pricolo, to be passed in sight, the first group (17th) of 1st Fighter Wing "departing for N.A." (so verbatim the call that I had been sent). On this occasion General Pricolo assured me that the group would within two or three days, after made some rearrangement necessary and I stated that to hasten the departure, according to my orders, would have given up, for this group, the application of anti-sand filters.

This is the background. Today (November 20) group that I passed on the 30 October saw again still there at Ciampino. I've heard from General Fougier the 18th.

The 19th current, while yesterday received General Pricolo farewell visit, I asked him about the departure of the group in question. He told me that a first delay was caused by bad weather that has arisen in the first days of November and that he also had given in argument with the General Gambara at the scene, not be concluded urgently sending and then had placed, after his return from Cyrenaica, for application to sand filters. Of this decision and of the consequent orders, General Pricolo returned from Cyrenaica the 8th and returned only the 14th, gave me the news, I urged, on the occasion of his farewell tour on the 19th.

As for the second group of the wing, which was supposed to be ready for the October 27, it is still in Milan.

I ordered the General Fougier, new Chief of the air force G.S., to provide with all urgency to enter go to Cyrenaica than there is available in fighter units and General Fougier gave me this morning about an urgent appeal of General Marchesi from Cyrenaica, urges the same sending.

I can't not point out, Duce, the severity of these facts, especially since, as regards the conditions of time, from 30 October until today the departure of the fighter wing could have carried out not once, but several times (the rest is departed and returned the same General Pricolo).

And I must also highlight how this *effective disobedience* of General Pricolo orders received from Comando Supremo has put our forces in Libya in terms of less efficiency at the precise moment when, as I was repeatedly and strongly cautioned, manifested itself in Cyrenaica a important enemy offensive initiative against us.

CAVALLERO

MUSSOUNI TO HILTER ON MEDITERRANEAN TRANSPORT

On, December 3, 1941-XX

Fuehrer,

The hubris of Mr Churchill, who claimed to overwhelm the Marmarica forces within a few hours, was crushed by the unwavering strength of too many Germanic and Italian. Not only the rapid victory over which were the British missed: but the situation is clearly upside down to our advantage. Unfortunately, the battle became battle of attrition and it is likely that this servant to the enemy to prepare new reinforcements and rekindle the fighting.

In this situation the problem of war in Libya becomes an issue of power and therefore a problem of transport.

General Bastico calls for sending new armored and motorized forces, not only to replenish his hard driven units, but also to constitute the necessary reserves; similar report did General Rommel, to which I did ask his opinion on the situation. These reinforcements are absolutely essential in order to deal with an enemy offensive that recovery must be considered next, and to restore a minimum of stocks that are now almost totally exhausted.

These imperatives need bump against the situation of our Mediterranean through transport, which occurred as a result of the tremendous increase in means of offense against our traffic in the Mediterranean, by the enemy.

Faced with a total requirement of 120,000 tons per month for overall need of Libya, excluding the transportation of new units, we were able to carry in November only 40,000 tons, while the battle has increased consumption and would therefore needed a minimum of 150,000-ton transport. The penultimate convoy of 7 ships, including two tankers, was completely sunk while accompanied by strong escort; the last convoy of five ships, three were sunk (including a large oil tanker), one was rerouted to Greece and one could arrive in Benghazi.

The inflow of the 2nd air force of C.A.T. will doubtless a big improvement to this situation, and so will be of great advantage the insidious and underwater means which you had ordered in the Mediterranean. So too-will it be of great use the personal action of Marshal Kesselring, whose posting in Italy consider it as an act of great generosity on your part, Fuehrer, even for the great experience that the Marshal brings with him.

But I think it would be very risky to assume that by these means the Mediterranean problem can be resolved in large measure so we can give the necessary tranquility of our transport with Libya.

The problem of our transport in the Mediterranean should in my view be considered in the following terms:

1st - the situation of our too many in Cyrenaica, and become critical and the problem of their immediate supply of urgent nature, within the limits of weeks, perhaps days.

2nd - the opponent is capable of increasing almost indefinitely its means of offense against our traffic, a measure that we increase the means of protection;

3rd - in this condition, I would consider that German troops like those in Italy, despite having passed successfully the one enemy, might be in danger at any moment with the consequences that it is superfluous to indicate;

4th - thus being the case, the need to open to traffic en route to Tunis and Bisena has become a necessity not only unavoidable but of absolute urgency.

I know, Fuehrer, that this problem of the route for Tunisia is one of our concerns already for a long time and that various difficulties have so far prevented from fixing it, though your will has long been used for this purpose, but in the situation which presents itself today I believe that every effort should be made because as soon as the necessary materials for Libya, including heavy weapons, artillery and tanks that can be transported by the route except to men by air transport.

Currently, and for a period the duration of which is not predictable we are obliged to limit our traffic with Libya to very little that can be transported by means of exception, i.e. submarines, Destroyers and a cruiser; the materials being transported are food, munitions and fuel, some special types, minimum extent necessary because the action of our troops is not totally paralyzed; but every day that passes makes the situation even more severe.

I am sure, Fuehrer, do not appeal to your compartment intervention in this matter so vital to the conduct of the fight in the Mediterranean, the result of which is closely linked to the future performance of our operations of war.

For this joint effort I'm providing, in relation to your recent interview with Count Ciano, to prepare an Alpine Corps composed of our best troops and a corps of infantry from the mountain which together with the fully reconstituted C.S.I.R. of men and resources, can represent a vigorous contribution of the Italian armed forces to continue Your wonderful advance to the Caucasus and beyond.

Only preserving our positions there in Libya and preparing the basis for our future action you can take the ordinary effort the end result, to which the inevitable victory in the Mediterranean open permanently on.

I will be grateful, Fuehrer, if by sharing how I hope the viewpoint that I believed needed to propose, you will want to give your intervention to the problem of the route to Tunisia the urgent solution that our delicate situation in Libya requires.

Have, Fuehrer, the meaning of my holiday camp friendship and loyalty.

MUSSOLINI

MONTEZEMOLO TO COMANDO SUPREMO
ON INTERVIEW BASTICO-ROMMEL

11 p.m.-12 DECEMBER 1941

Send. - for information-a summary of the interview Bastico-Rommel of the day December 8 interview that General Bastico in his. Telegram on that date had been rather lively, reserving report by letter about it, which then did not find it to do.

The attached report is not officially broadcast; I had personally copy, and should not be have been demand received.

Attach - in part - the sorry expressions of General Rommel: that (marked in red on page 6) of human temperament, which-while it's at the moment want to (in the particular case operational jurisdiction on Ajdabiya)-lets drag a disproportionate threat or forecast. In part, however, must be attributed to concerns that the German divisions and the German commander in Africa can be captured, the dominant concern in Rommel for the strong sentiment of the prestige of Germanic arms.

By verifications made by General Bastico shows that moved relief to the Corp of Gambara for slowness of movement or execution of orders should be attributed to delays in the transmission of orders from the Panzergruppe to the Corp and partly to the limited ability of movement of our vehicles off the road.

General Rommel. asks a lot his troops (he knows something the same German divisions, which are truly mobile everywhere) and tends to ask at our, and in particular the «Trieste»-so-called motorized but in fact truck portable-more than I can give in terms of movement.

Dutifully, however it cannot be excluded that the divergence of views between the Corps operational commander, and Commander of the Panzergruppe (Gen. Gambara did not approve of the abandonment of Bir el Gobi and the repeated races between Tobruk and Sollum) we sometimes delayed the execution of orders of General Rommel by C.A.M.

Currently such friction between the two commands should be eliminated with the return of General Gambara to SuperASI. However General considering interim Commander Piazzoni and again right now turns to the titular Commander at SuperASI. for operational matters for which should be headed by Panzergruppe. Panzergruppe has a little guilt, which just takes care of the continuity of the connection to the employees and is always on the move. But he did wonder if the appointment of a Corp General the Commander of C.A.M. do not eliminate many drawbacks, that organizational phase had manifested to the duplicity of a same person.

Overall, I think the current relations between Supercomando and Gen. Rommel satisfactory, given the precedents and the momentary darkness natural things matter. I see no need for specific measures in this regard, as well

having had knowledge of the letter Ecc. Bastico directs today to Ecc. Cavallero. Despite the judgment in it contained, on Gen. Bastico has firm intention to proceed in accordance with the statement of objections. Rommel: this morning at a report held by Gen. Rommel, whom I witnessed and intervened Gen. Gambara, the relations Rommel-Gambara were cordial and perfectly in tune with the current reciprocal positions.

However I continue to follow this issue and in my work as a link between the two commands, facilitated by the full confidence that I demonstrate Ecc. Bastico and Gambara and the post about General Rommel view towards the Italian Comando Supremo official. The extreme courtesy that the Marshal Kesselring I recognized and hailed as the staff officer Ecc. Cavallero, I earned some confidence by G.S. Gause, who is normally very closed.

Leut. COL. MONTEZEMOLO

* * *

MINUTES OF THE MEETING ON 8 DECEMBER DAY
BETWEEN 11:00 HOURS and 14:00 HOURS IN A WADI AT THE BAY OF AIN EL
GAZALA WHERE WAS BASED, AT THE TIME, GENERAL ROMMEL

The interview took place inside a coach equipped as a Office; were present at the meeting:

Ecc. Ettore Bastico

Gen. Rommel

Ecc. Ettore Manca di Mores

Gen. Gause

Ecc. Calvi di Bergolo

Lt. Col. Westphal

Lt. Col.G.S. Quinto Ravajoli

Lt. Col.. Carlo Boffa

Maj. Mellenthin

Official interpreter in

in the second half:

Maj. Di Marco (of C.A.M.)

Sub-lieutenant interpreter.

The translation was very imperfect.

INTRODUCTION

General Rommel was invited, in the night before from his Excellence to an interview with Bastico at Umm Er he changes to announce important decisions of the Comando Supremo. General Rommel replied not power and informed him that, unless warned before 9 o'clock, could be for 11:00 hours at his command in Ain el Gazala.

He was confirmed by the official appointment for 11:00 hours at the command of the Panzergruppe.

At precisely 11:00 his Excellence Bastico came in place of appointment and came down from the car next to the command bus. A German officer who was there, immediately warned of the arrival of his Excellence Bastico. Nobody came out to receive him. After 5 minutes the car went up for Bastico to wait. Only after another 10 minutes General Rommel that approached the car of his Excellence Bastico.

Climb into the bus General Rommel-very excited and in a disorderly fashion and hasty-start talking:

Rommel-German armored group was unable to achieve a breakthrough because it has not been possible to make fights together.

So yesterday I was at Bir el Gobi only the German armored Corps which after long waited has withdrawn. Would have to get around from the South the opponent but Gambara's Corp absence that should have come from the North did not leave. Sollum -front Bardia was fought and fought valiantly.

The resolution to abandon the investment of Tobruk and break contact with the enemy is bitter and difficult, but it is necessary if you do not want to be cut off completely. I must also say that the value (perhaps efficiency) of the troops is not very great.

The German Corps lost the largest number of its battle tanks; It has fought for three weeks and claimed the entire heavy part of the fight. The *Afrika* Division held the eastern front South of Tobruk and now is reduced to little more than two battalions.

The «Ariete» and «Trieste» have had few casualties so far; but the maneuver are exaggeratedly slow and need days to move. Only the «Bologna» has had heavy losses and is reduced to about 2 battalions. The air situation is also difficult because the air force our relationship with those opponents is of 1 to 6 for the bombardment and 1 to 2 fighters and the enemy takes advantage of this superiority to compete with air strikes and ground operations, machine gunning so much that it is almost impossible to make movements, even at night. The enemy wants to keep us here to maneuver around. Improvements cannot be achieved. Marshal Kesselring would send reinforcements but we need time to have the forces that we need. So far we have been able to interdict the enemy the way in Benghazi and Ajdabiya: but it is important that el Agheila-Marada-Agedabia and Benghazi remain in our hands to receive the necessary supplies. I took it for now the decision to fall back slowly, and only when forced, on the position of Ain el Gazala. Though all my orders must be executed otherwise you run the risk of losing everything. For example, Gambara and Navarini yesterday morning (1) received my notice conventions 333 final which meant to start packing in a certain way. All troops in the East of El Adem had to turn more to the West (1 bn. «Bolzano»-div. «Pavia» and the «Aosta» squadrons). I had ordered this consciously to economize forces and to have some staggering in

(1) At 13:30 in a conversation with Gen. Gambara, Rommel had agreed not to order the withdraw.

In depth. His Ecc. Gambarà ordered Navarini not to perform the movement, although not by him Navarrini. His Ecc. Navarrini is desperate although generally calm. I had also ordered that conventional signal 333 the C.A.M. deal with «Trieste» the face of «Pavia» to allow this to disengage and that «Trieste» -Since it is short distances- ceded its trucks to thee «Pavia» at the Ain el Gazala. But this order has not been executed.

Bastico-have you asked at the C.A.M. the reason for this? There may be situations which impede the execution of an order.

Rommel-no fix exists: it is only a matter of indiscipline.

Bastico - (lively) do not beg that you speak of indiscipline of my officers and my long-time commands give evidence of possessing the highest sense of discipline and duty. On the other hand a high ranking General may also delay the execution of an order or make those variants that are recommended by exigent circumstances.

Rommel-it is just ill will. Given the opponent's air superiority you can't delay the movement back.

Bastico-I am available to give the break of contact with the enemy; I observe, however, since there is talk of indiscipline, which what I knew nothing and that the first news I had from an order issued by Navarini to his divisions and sent to me for information.

Calvi-was unable to communicate because they missed connections.

Rommel-what is more important is that the troops should be in a position at Ain el Gazala to prevent that the enemy can occupy it.

Requests that in order to coordinate the action as a whole have put under his orders the troops of Cyrenaica (Gen. Nuvoloni) until Agheila-Marada including.

Bastico-Responds that he asked Rome. Law then the order number 31062 Op. received from the Supreme Command.

Rommel-I knew nothing. Still asks who will take command of Cyrenaica and insists to be put to his orders.

Bastico-reserves the right to decide.

Rommel-say you want to send troops to Ajdabiya, but that should be his orders.

Bastico-calls to Ajdabiya to send both the « Ariete » or «Trieste» when it occupied the line of Ain el Gazala.

Rommel-notes that it is not possible, that the « Ariete »-or «Trieste»-are slow and they will send its Division «Afrika».

Bastico-observes that the speed of movement of «Afrika» is not higher than that of «Trieste»; they are motorized troops.

Rommel-notes that depends not only on the vehicles but also by officers.

Bastico-Protest that will not allow you to do malicious on his officers praise; still says he wants at Ajdabiya Italian Division.

Rommel-Excited, with making imperious and distinctly rude shouts which fought for three weeks to win a battle and who is determined to bring his divisions to Tripoli and then get intern in Tunisia (officer nod with his head) (2).

Bastico-The beckons with the hand to lower the tone of voice. After various discussions it was agreed that the Division be sent to Ajdabiya a mixed Italian German units.

Bastico-Says that it would be desirable to resume as soon as possible first Gialo and that throw back the enemy in the desert area you would part in crisis.

Rommel-notes that weapons (maybe «forces») are worn out and that the operation will be able to do later when, over time, we'll be stronger.

In may-he adds-the Italians have not allowed to come to Africa, two German divisions.

The enemy has the ability to strengthen and we can't receive anything.

Bastico-notes that would force France to allow the transit through Tunisia.

Rommel-replies that now we do not because we are in a bad situation. We haven't won the battle. There were two possibilities: either win or withdraw.

We have not won, there remains that to retreat. I need for the Italian unit, who fought well and that I hold dear, of vehicles: now I'm taking them from my unit.

Bastico-talk that have already been granted the required 200 trucks yesterday. 50 have already arrived in the night at Ain el Gazala, the remaining will arrive today.

Rommel-I hope I keep el Ain Gazala line for some time, in order to vacate the base logistics. At least all this time you must be maintained.

The C.T.A. has yesterday fought at Bir el Gobi; now it is a little withdrawn. On the Ain el Gazala will get for now the Division «Afrika» in 1st line and the «Pavia» in 1st line; then I'll put the «Trento» in 1st line and the «Brescia» and «Pavia» in the 2nd line. But it is urgent to have the vehicles.

Bastico-asks why Rommel has two consecutive nights suspended the supply of aircraft «Savona» which is without water or food.

Rommel-Risponde che il generale De Giorgis has refused to abandon his position and fallback. Says he will withdraw the «Savona» only from strong points «Cova » «D'Avanzo», and «Bir Ghirba» and that the will to reinforce the «Cirener» and «Faltembacher» and «Halfaya» (with this but need not cease supply) that much hinder the enemy's supplies.

Bastico-Agrees but says it is necessary to provide for air supply.

(2) This phrase Rommel he repeated twice more clearly, a high enough voice shortly after, when his Excellence Bastico - moved to confer with Maj. Di Marco -was left to other table with Gen. Gause, Lt. Col. Westphal and Lt. Col. Ravajoli.

Rommel-later principals remain in place will be picked up by using the Menastir airfield and the sea.

Announced that his command will be located between Manuba and Derna. This just has been manned the line Ain el Gazala. Asks that his Excellence Gambarà confirms the movements. Given the difficult situation of the C.A.M. it is also appropriate that Gambarà remains in place until installation is completed.

Calvi - (after conferring with Major Di Marco): Says that the 333 order was not received. Only in the night came at the C.A.M. the order to replace the «Pavia». Reports that Excellence Gambarà said that if you give to the «Pavia» vehicles of «Trieste» no more moves. Anyway will move tomorrow.

Rommel-says that tomorrow will be late. You must release today the «Pavia», otherwise may be taken prisoner as well as the entire C.A.M. done the day the movement of vehicles «Pavia» can return immediately to «Trieste».

The conversation continues then more calm; his Excellence Bastico recommends that is very responsible for the police service.

COMANDANTE SUPERIORE
ARMED FORCES IN NORTH AFRICA

Operational zone 12 Dec. 1941-XX

Gen. Excellence. Army Corps

UGO CAVALLERO

Chief of the General staff General Rome

Dear Excellency,

Colonel Montezemolo handed me, upon his arrival, your letter of 9 c.m. and what in it tell me you are very grateful.

Resolve in an organic way the issue of Command was a vital necessity and not postponed, but it did not present a solution: reconfirm Gen. Rommel in command of Italian and German troops and place his orders even the few ground troops making up the X Army Corps. So I just did, but I believe my duty to represent you that if I had had the chance I would have adopted a different solution.

Indeed, on Gen. Rommel, in the first phase of this battle if confirmed his qualities as a valiant general officer, has certainly demonstrated to own-at least in harmonic measurement-that of a commander of great unity.

Instead of taking immediately in his hands the conduct of operations, put it at the head of his Armored Corp for five days went by turning to the immense battlefield, West of trying to engage the enemy mass, but without ever succeeding, which is why, despite achieving local success, ended to submit his divisions to excessive effort and huge losses in men-especially senior officers-and means.

Back to his command post he tried, it is true, to mass with his divisions and Corps of Maneuver, but, when he formed, the outcome of the battle was already virtually compromise; Is that how victorious in tactical field, facing the possibility of being overwhelmed by superior forces, saw himself forced to retreat going in difficult conditions and that luckily succeeded to the strength and discipline demonstrated by our divisions and for the spirit of sacrifice of the Corps of Maneuver.

To this the Gen. Rommel has then moved the fault of non-implementation of orders and slow execution: but the first proved unfounded and the second does not respond to the objective examination of the facts.

I repeat therefore: no one can contest Gen. Rommel's impulse, ascending, daring, physical resistance to any test, but he is also a stubborn, that reason more often based on prejudices, then nobody will budge; that does not suffer advice, much less orders: that, in words, recognizes Comando Superiore obedience to duty, but that proves facts to remember: and therefore not in possession of the qualities that are needed in order to coordinate the action of several large units that have different characteristics, which are those of his

orders. As is my duty I will try to keep in hand the reins of action: but it will be very difficult, given the character of the man and his habit of not ever telling his intentions, it emanating from him orders unless these have already had a principle of execution. And this in spite of the references given verbally and in writing. What is certain is that if the three Corps, XXI, of Maneuver and German Armored, were placed under direct orders of the Comando Superiore, operations might have, in my opinion, a more harmonious, more unitary and hence more profitable.

Of course this my confidential letter, does not aim at any discharge of those responsibilities that I compete: but just to clarify a situation most particularly delicate and complex.

And now we both liked that, proud of your benevolence and Duce, you confirm that the Italian troops are wonderful and that in all of us is ever-living faith and steadfast to the will to win. With love and devotion. Your aff.mo

ETTORE BASTICO

GENERAL GOVERNMENT OF LIBYA
COMANDO SUPERIORE ARMED FORCES IN NORTH AFRICA
General Staff

No. 01-20984 of prot. Op.

P.M. on, 11 December 13, 1941-XX

Topic: DEFENSE OF CIRENAICA

*To his Excellency General of the Army Ugo Cavallero
Chief of the General staff General*

The dispatch No. 31089/Op. of December came the morning of the 12th when General Gambarà was at El Fteiah (Derna), which I sent to confer with General Rommel and *to get him to a strenuous defense of Ain Gazala line.*

Immediately I sent the telegram to General Gambarà because he could talk separately with Rommel and insist so again about the arguments and considerations expressed by this command and that I myself mentioned as key of the interview.

On the same day I then sent to General Rommel excerpt written (appendix 1) the same telegram in which I explicitly clarified, confirming of my directives 01/20680 of 9 December:

-that the Cyrenaica must be defended vigorously at the line of Ain Gazala; -that the decision last about the withdraw is left to me;

-that it will eradicate quickly from everyone's mind the idea of more withdraws.

At the same time, the commands and the dependant troops I issued orders attachments 01/20915 and 01/20934 of 12 and 13 current (appendixes 2 and 3).

General Rommel, after various conversations, agreed in concept to defend strenuously the Ain Gazala line; this concordance has also expressed this morning, adding however: "that depends on the enemy".

In fact the General Rommel doesn't think and doesn't care what of the withdraw.

In every meeting, in every conversation, it just forces deployment projects on the Derna-Mechili, then on the Bena-Chaulan-Gerrari, then the defense of Benghazi and Ajdabiya; lines that change every day and every hour.

The fierce defense of Ain Gazala line he does not ever speak; if forced to talk about it cares only for vehicles because he fears he won't be able to vacate the XXI Corp. in time (see appendix 4-minutes of the meeting of the 13th). In short, you have the feeling that this defense is not on his belief and who do not take it seriously.

In fact:

-He made clear to leave behind all heavy services, as well as all heavy field artillery, leaving Ain Gazala line reduced to the Divisional artillery; many services are already at Mechili, Derna, etc.;

-has already lightened the Ain Gazala line by a regiment of the «Brescia» and the remains of the «Bologna» sending them on Derna.

-plan to participate in the battle of Ain Gazala line only with his artillery, which are not seen, stating that the two German armored divisions are too small and have by now only 20-25 tanks;

-does not use more his divisions from the 6th and holds them to the extreme right, lagging far behind.

I therefore feel that the General Rommel now worry not only wear down further his divisions, leaving the more serious battle weight to already very tired Italian divisions; and I can't even rule out the possibility that, if a serious reverse were to rule, he did not withdrawing the Armored Divisions first for El Abiar and Mechili on Benghazi, putting in a crisis without Italian troops solution-for vehicles-deficiency could not follow him.

Because it is my belief that Ain Gazala positions can hold out (especially if you bring back in the rear artillery line and if the German armored divisions to cooperate actively with the use of tanks) will leave nothing unattempted to convince General Rommel that Ain Gazala line must defend Cyrenaica strenuously.

But since, as I said in my confidential letter on 11th current. directed to V.E., it is impossible to move General Rommel from his preconceptions, if the thought of it. E. V. adjust with this command, please consider whether to gather or not that would secure in this sense an invitation to that effect to get General Rommel directly from Duce.

The General of the Army
Top Commander FF. AA. A.S.
ETTORE BASTICO

NOTE: ATTACHMENTS ARE OMITTED.

MONTEZEMOLO TO COMANDO SUPREMO
ON CONVERSATION WITH ROMMEL

11 p.m., December 14, 1941-XX

THE COMANDO SUPREMO

In addition to 56/M telegram this morning.

Refer to conversation last night from 20 hours to 21 hours with Mr. General Rommel had specially summoned me to his command post (also General Gause).

1st - General Rommel: pressed that he does not intend to expose appreciations on the Italian Army, but only targets and technical surveys on certain units under his orders: are not taken amiss.

The Italian army in Africa suffered serious losses a year ago: it is not the case of climate to the causes, but we must consider those that may still have value. The operating framework for the Italian unit is not in all units are sufficiently trained for these fights. There are some excellent commanders such as those of *Savona* Division (General De Giorgis), *Pavia* Division (General Fernandez) and others. But the way to lead is not suitable for this kind of war: the commanders have little initiative, require detailed orders of their expertise, almost willing to put back the responsibility to superiors. On the other hand they contribute to this state of affairs by tying up the dependants and controlling orders beforehand. This leads to scheme, particularly serious drawback in this area and by these means, that require you to act and decide quickly.

The training of the troops left much to desire: in many units, however, have made significant progress, for example in *Pavia* and Divisional artillery in General.

However, though you can't expect that the Italian soldier, talented and brave fighter, combat without needed armament: divisions are located here such as suitable weapons against the Mark 2 tank: each Division should provided a type 88 for anti-tank use. Asks that you use for this purpose the 88 materials for anti-aircraft defense now in Tripoli and Benghazi, giving a battery for Division; When you come to a group by Division, Italian divisions will be in good conditions support the struggle against modern tanks.

I replied thanking generically for his judgments, which I reported as valuable experience of war, and ensuring they would not have been taken in bad part.

I explained that, for battle in progress, command habits, weapons and training of too many put his orders, are those known to him: this situation Mr. General would undoubtedly adapted his action and his requests.

For the 88-question appertaining to SuperASI-I reported and I was already doing something to that effect (a group of two batteries of Tripoli),

but that's probably a lot you couldn't do it for most of materials by location, without means of transportation. (I then reported, and SuperASI is providing to that very little that can),

2nd - General Rommel is then passed to speak (as I have communicated in short this morning with telegram 55/M) of the situation, judgmental critical.

For 25 days you struggle with heavy losses. It is possible that even the enemy's losses are heavy, but still has many more means than us and better fed, he recovers more quickly. Keep it hard for since that possibility to Ain el Gazala, but will not be able to continue along this fight since on a rapid influx of reinforcements you can't count.

The purpose cannot be to destroy on the line to lose then Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, but to prevent losing the Tripolitania and that thus the enemy take contact with the French North Africa. Communicated to the Führer to his decision in this regard.

Of course you don't go from one day to the next in Tripolitania, but will continue to fight tirelessly giving ground step by step. According to the news a first step may be necessary the night on the 15th.

General Rommel gives importance to the fact that such a decision cannot depend on Supercomando, Duce was in charge of the command of the troops and the left hand free to do this; He has full responsibility for this sector of the fight. Please then General Basticoti give it complete freedom of action: tie it to maintaining Ain el Gazala could lead to losing everything.

You have fought like fury and maximum losses, especially German, are so severe that it is the limits of possibility. This follows a little bit to the fact that he had to employ German troops in the toughest tasks without burning the Italian troops, which we would find it uncomfortable for those reasons of organization, equipment and training.

For the purposes of the war would not be any yield fall to say that after a valiant fight the divisions « Trento », « Trieste », etc. had to surrender due to lack of ammunition and food, as Tripolitania and Northern Africa would be in enemy hands.

The position of Derna in this covers the port and leaves us possession of the entire green line Cyrenaica is strong: If you succeed in retiring in troops forces there is hope that, less flow to the enemy reinforcements, the strong enemy offensive there-it's threadbare.

However the advance in Tripolitania, where there are troops, and neglecting the Cyrenaica and besieged it from the sea and desert, is very easy because the English supply difficulties will never have. Must reserve for this case full freedom of action and believes that it is the intent of the Duce.

I objected:

-that Supercomando believes that pressure and the possibility of the enemy are not likely to threaten the position of Ain Gazala on the other hand, considers that on the Derna-Mechili, largest, reach less as forces are now on the current one, is narrower: it would therefore be less strong; for the small number of vehicles is also deeply concerned for the correct withdraw of the XXI C.A.;

-that, to the best of my knowledge, the decision of abandonment of lines

Later it would be reserved for General Bastico, which of course take into account for such decisions essentially the appreciation of General Rommel.

General Rommel contended that a decision may be necessary as a matter of urgency, and then he should be able to take it. That on the other hand, General Bastico gave him such freedom of action when he placed Cyrenaica under his orders.

3rd – For the operation of his command requests that the Italian liaison Staff beyond connecting with Supercomando but collaborate with the staff of the *Panzergruppe*, particularly in connection with the dependant large Italian units and with the Intendenza. Specifies details about the Organization and people.

I replied that I would refer the request to Supercomando and which I thought would have been certainly well accepts (indeed Supercomando as requested and willing as a result).

4th -General Rommel gives much weight to the defense of Derna, the rapid inflow of air barrier anti-tank units.

I can assure you I shall demand him to Rome and so I did with no. 57, telegram of this morning.

5th -the General Rommel represents the longing that in Italian he quotes-how do Italian troops--even the German.

I can assure you that it is the intent of the Comando Supremo of cite target the troops who are fighting or stand out. This is done based on the reports of Supercomando, which then he represents, in the news, the units which have distinguished themselves and who want to be mentioned.

After discussion with the Chief of the G. S., General Rommel I explains the desire that you avoid, in the bulletin, to attribute this or that action to the Italian or German troops, to this or that unit, not to give information to the enemy and avoid possible errors that I'm sorry to the troops, and he usually uses, or at least more frequently the expression "Italian-German troops" or «Axis troops»as almost always in the various actions the units are mixed.

I replied I would have sent the desire (and I do so with this sheet).

* * *

Back to Supercomando I reported about:

-requests on the use of the 88 as anti-tank and about the G.S. liaison at the *Panzergruppe* (developing solution issues, as far as possible);

-the issue of withdrawal and the competence to decide.

For that matter, General Bastico telegraphed a code I'm Supreme command with N. 01/20986 and I reported with no 56/M.

Taking again this night discussions this morning in review, General Bastico decided to meet with Rommel. He started the meeting by communicating you have granted to General Gause and the *Panzergruppe* Lieutenant Colonel operations Bureau Chief the silver metal for V.M., to the Major Chief of Office the bronze «1» . The delivery of the medals was very welcome.

In the interview-which I have witnessed-the General Rommel has repeated the

appreciations and the arguments I gave last night and that I mentioned above: deferent and courteous towards general Bastico, has strictly prohibited any discussion on competence to decide.

General Bastico concluded the discussion by stating:

"In the end I'd be opposed to Ain Gazala line withdraw. I will however give great weight to your opinion and your appreciation of the situation, judgment and appreciation of you are of course responsible. I invite you to consider very seriously the possibility of non-mobile troops, in order to adapt to these possibilities the modalities of withdrawal in order to bring back the best of the forces".

I would not have been possible to change the General Rommel and his staff, an idea also based on many sane military considerations. The bump and the conflict that in the discussion of the night appeared inevitable was averted. I get the impression that General Bastico, in difficult and painful situation, find solace in the thought of having thus satisfied the Comando Supremo. General Rommel made me say that we are very satisfied.

LT. COL. MONTEZEMOLO

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD IN BERTHA
14 DECEMBER 1941 -XX at 11:00 at the
HEADQUARTERS OF THE COMMAND OF GENERAL ROMMEL

PRESENT

Ecc. Gen. Bastico
Ecc Gen. Gambara
Ecc Gen. Calvi
Gen. Torriano.
Lt. Col. Ravajoli
1st Sen. Rossetti
Maj. Tuzi
Gen. Rommel
Gen. Frohlich
Gen. Gause
Lt. Col. Heggenreiner
Lt. Col. Westphal
Maj. Mellenthin

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Rommel-The enemy has launched yesterday a violent attack with the intention of lay of the coast and withdraw. The attack has been channeled into the breach already made yesterday. We managed to repulse the attack and inflict heavy losses on the enemy. The Italian-German airpower and C.T.A have counterattacked continuously. The «Pavia» rejected valiantly the opponent but the forehead is wide and shallow.

Overall the enemy last night was detached from our lines while leaving some infiltrations in the direction of Bir Temrad.

This morning the enemy attempted another attack from the East with its Indian Division. The Italian -German aviation has destroyed most of the troops are ready. It seems that the enemy has occupied hill 131, but I think it's local successes. Command of the «Pavia» has insured that will keep his positions. We have done everything to compete; this morning the C.T.A. has stuck to a depth of about 5 km. And assume that in the afternoon the enemy will attack again. But I think we can maintain our positions aided by airpower that has still holding Martuba airports and Derna.

Our losses are not very serious. I have the impression that the enemy has had instead of strong. This is confirmed by the interception and the enemy's behavior.

Over time, however, during the fight, and we won't be able to keep if we do not have considerable reinforcements. A encirclement from the South can cut off. If the airpower could engage in that would be impossible, but it has limited ability due to fuel deficiency. The airpower consumes fuel arriving daily but that is insufficient for intense intervention as would be necessary.

Even supplies for ground troops were not prepared for a long time. We fight for 4 weeks and if the enemy did not reach what you already scarce, it must be the value of our troops. The goal is to conquer the Cyrenaica and Tripolitania.

We must economize our forces because it fails of its purpose; at no cost should be able to occupy the Tripolitania: If that happened it would be disastrous.

It is natural that not give ground to no avail. So keep it today, tomorrow and the location of Ain el Gazala.

If we can get supplies by sea it can be also possibility to maintain the line.

Bastico-from yesterday's entire fleet is in the Mediterranean to ensure the arrival of two convoys: one in Tripoli and one in Benghazi, and at the same time to give battle of intervention to the English fleet. Is closely linked to action of the Italian and German airpower.

Tomorrow morning the convoy should already be in Benghazi: will bring food, materials, ammunition, fuel and even a Italian tank Bn. and a German tank company. All this implies a consumption of 50,000 tons of fuel oil.

The convoy will also bring fuel.

You have to resist for a long time on the positions of Ain el Gazala.

Rommel-eventually the enemy could break the deal and travel. I agree with you that should bring back the troops for the defense of Tripolitania and not be cut off. And better than being taken prisoner. If the enemy breaks the terms of «Pavia» cuts out the «Pavia» and «Bresci» and this is to be avoided in every way.

Gambara-With the means and reinforcements that we cannot avoid this danger?

Rommel-I don't think so to be reinforced soon.

Gambara-today I am giving you two battalions and a force; tomorrow the other two then two more battalions. Without what's to come from Italy.

Rommel-let me explain the situation in full. We must avoid in all ways the encirclement and annihilation of our forces. I hope that we will agree. In answer to this danger in one night you should fall back on Tmimi.

Bastico-In one night you won't: there are no vehicles. Beyond those already can't give other data, otherwise no more eating and artillery remain without ammunition.

This is the situation which we must bear in mind that binds us.

Rommel-In this case you have to try at all costs to pull out the troops. If they can't do a rush up to Tmimi, must make an interim leap.

Bastico-I even gave an order to provide trucks in Tunisia at any cost.

Rommel-The «Bresci» has already a regiment back; If we can gradually retreat other troops.

Bastico-If we weaken, overwhelm us too soon.

Rommel-is not said. Repulsed an enemy attack, we can break contact. The air force will help us. Withdrawing the troops is absolutely necessary to defend ourselves.

Gambara-release at night is very difficult. We run the risk of losing the troops without any fighting.

Rommel-is also difficult when you are in the first line, to break off by day due to the aerial surveillance. The «Trieste» could do so because has antiaircraft weapons. But non-motorized troops and unarmed with antiaircraft weapons can do nothing during the day.

Gambara-The night you can retreat to motorized troops, not troops on foot. It is difficult task: the darkness, some enemy armored cars that

disturb, the weariness of the troops, are all the elements to keep in mind.

Rommel-agree. It is a difficult but hopefully will succeed. Of course you need to setup the first line of Derna. There are already the regiments of «Brescia» and the remains of «Bologna»-.

Bastico- is good the Derna line?

Rommel- Against armored troops Yes.

Bastico-is very long and only in some places is strong.

Rommel-is a large sector that just lends itself to the use of tanks.

Bastico-El Ftèjah airport, however, is a very weak point, once broke through here is circumvented the line.

Rommel-the enemy will not attack on this point because it has little hope of passing tanks. Will be defended by minefields. South can only pass too many and they do not concern us. The position is very strong.

The Armored Corps will be deployed around Mechili.

Bastico -So go on a position that is much broader and we are weak everywhere. When you have a few to keep forces reunited.

Rommel-I am convening the few mobile forces to Mechili.

Gambara-tactical field we've always won. The enemy pressed but not too strong. Why now ...

Rommel-The enemy is moving from Syria a new armored Division and other forces and I got to prepare: about 15 days these forces could be here. It may well be that they go to India.

Gambara-you're always been so optimistic: because now you no longer so and see all black?

Rommel-when I get to Mechili 2 armoured Corps plus the «Trento»-and «Pavia» I'll attack the enemy and annihilate him.

Bastico-at this time, facing a new withdraw I don't know if too many will remain solid. Too many on which take into account are largely on foot and I don't know if they can arrive.

Rommel-assure you that too many resist. The enemy, which did not constitute a major force, will be in doubt if attacking North or South. The terrain is very difficult and will intersperse its too many. Must use the via Balbia for supplies and will have very strong aviation's losses.

Our troops resist: I did good defense experience with Italian troops.

Bastico-then why are we not stopping where we are?

Rommel-I'm afraid to be bypassed.

At this time arrived at the Panzergruppe Command a telegram that said that a rogue column of 100 trucks has infiltrated among the «Pavia» and «Trieste» and at the same time the C.T.A. was attacked by considerable forces.

The telegram arrives in time to support Rommel's thesis which he incorporates:

Rommel-there's that leave and take us to Tmimi area, otherwise we lose the other divisions. I hope the aviation aid but I think in the long run we won't be able to resist.

The two Italian Corps communicated that aren't able to counterattack with their forces.

In this situation you should disengage itself tonight and fold over Tmimi hoping that then there come the reinforcements.

I'll be grateful to Supercomando for all those troops can bring.

Gambara-I would like to clarify that I'm definitely opposed to withdrawal from Ain el Gazala because it answers a need and because we are not able to do so without running the risk of losing all non-mobile troops.

Bastico -I invite you to consider very seriously the possibility of non-mobile troops in order to adapt to these possibilities the modalities of withdrawal in order to bring back the maximum forces.

SUMMARY OF THE TOPICS COVERED IN THE CONVERSATION
On 17 DECEMBER 1941 HOURS 09:30 at
BERTA AT THE PANZERGRUPPE AFRIKA'S COMMAND

PRESENT

Ecc. Gen. Cavallero
Ecc. Gen. Bastico
Ecc. Gen. Gambara
Ecc. Gen. Calvi
Lt. Col. G.S. Montezemolo
Lt. Col. G.S. Ravajoli

Marshal Kesselring
General Rommel
General Gause
Lt. Col. Heggeneiner
Lt. Col. Westphal
Maj. Mellenthein
An interpreter

Operations in North Africa Vol. 2

Gen. Rommel-takes stock of the situation. After 4 weeks of fighting the troop are exhausted, and if in the last few days it has fought very well and inflicted heavy losses on the enemy, would no longer be able to fight in open field; This also for lack of vehicles. The enemy can maneuver as he wants and bring on new means and new tanks. In recent days had only 30 tanks: today already have 150.

The location of Ain el Gazala was defending to the last, maybe even a little too; defend yourself against the enemy attacking from every part is very expensive. The XXI C.A. has lost a lot of material and it was doubtful whether he would be able to disengage; the «Trieste» has lost most of its vehicles; most of his troops with those of «Pavia» will have to withdraw on foot. I ordered the D.A.K. to carry as much as it can also of Italian soldiers.

We do not know if the enemy presses strongly; unless premises would be a great fortune. A few days would be enough to raise the morale to do flow from the back too many reinforcements. And I intend to keep for as long as possible the Derna-Mechili and location along the Derna airfield. If the enemy presses with many forces towards Derna maybe can attach it to the side and on the back with the help of aviation. Prerequisite for this is that the enemy concentrated its mass towards Derna. If, as most likely, press onto Mechili and further South to reach Ajdabiya, we must put ourselves in winning the battle of Agedabia. You must withdraw the forces to Ajdabiya, leaving the current line only of rearguards.

The ammunition for the German units is sufficient only for 2 days and the fuel is sufficient to reach Ajdabiya including any fighting; for catering we still have 15 days of food.

Have not yet abandoned hope of get reinforcements, but is all that are waiting to no avail.

Gen. Bastico-The "Sabratha" Division will move to Sirte, and try to remove from Tripolitania all weapons possible.

Gen. Cavailero-we will do everything possible to send by air a grenadier battalion with 24 anti-tank pieces of 47 mm.

Mar. Kesselring-talks about the use of German paratroopers, not

know yet where they are. Because it is non-motorized divisions would be well used in rearward positions. You can have, at most, a weak Regiment; at the very least a strong Bn., armed with AT guns from 20 and 37 mm.

Gen. Cavallero-yesterday I got to indicate the directions of the Duce. They are as follows: the Tripolitania goes defense at any cost; the Cyrenaica goes Defense for as long as possible, This does not mean that orders to clear out the Cyrenaica, so I am very grateful to General Rommel had said it will remain for as long as possible the position of Derna, compatibly means, with the need not to be bypassed by many forces.

Il Duce does not exclude the possibility that, over time, you may qualify for more favorable conditions. Il Duce want Cyrenaica is kept for as long as possible on the understanding that the Tripolitania must be saved at all costs.

Gen. Rommel-A great difficulty is given by transporting dismounted troops. To motorize cannot be used with the vehicles that we have, but we should be able to get a partial motorization.

Gen. Cavallero-I hope that General Rommel would be willing to help us with the means of the German units.

Gen. Rommel-we also have a non-motorized Division to which we had to now provide vehicles. On the battlefield you will lose many vehicles. Anyway we can use empty means of return; I am very close to my heart the last soldier and the last Italian worker.

You must bring A/T weapons by air, so the troops will have a certain fighting value.

Gen. Bastico-about the vehicles we can: 160 vehicles were given to the XXI C. A.

Gen. Rommel-Many vehicles are missing, you have to do cleaning in the backline and collect and sort all those to be found there.

Mar. Kesselring-Ajdabiya area is the hub of all positions; until we have that area will be easy even the re-conquest of Cyrenaica. Traffic interruption you have to give the enemy a delay of at least a week.

Gen. Bastico-let us not deceive ourselves about the value of interruptions; in this terrain they slow little.

Mar. Kesselring-in the opinion of the Duce you must gain ground by any means.

Gen. Bastico-you must maintain the advanced occupation of Derna to defend the airfield?

Mar. Kesselring-leaving it in the hands of the enemy, the difficulties for our aviation will be much greater.

Gen. Bastico-But the enemy will not be able to use it because its subject to our artillery fire.

Mar. Kesselring-an interim occupation is appropriate; will be abandoned when the defense would be too much trouble; If you were to leave Derna should also be unusable port.

Gen. Bastico-About should be strictly peremptory who will give orders to implement them.

Gen. Rommel-is already fixed: when the Division «Brescia» has withdrawn his regiment, the Commander of the regt. can sort the blasting of

the mine. The preparation of same was ordered to X.

Gen. Gambaro-make the port useless is serious thing: If later we will need it?

Mar. Kesselring-not a great harbor but would very much for the supply of the English; first thing when again thinking about the withdrawal, then we will think to ahead. When withdraw requires everything to be destroyed as they do in Russia.

Gen. Cavallero-keep the Derna- Berta-Mechili line for as long as possible. The Comando Superiore A.S will flow into Ajdabiya everything that you can draw from Tripolitania; We will try to send it by any means, the anti-tank battalion, aviation gasoline, and then, aviation under high leadership of Marshal Kesselring, as the task will be as jettison of the cases. For transport, we will see what will be the result of ongoing convoy, but although in part it doesn't reach, this does not change anything to our decisions; repeat our efforts for all roads, including Tunisia, to ensure the necessary supplies.

Gen. Rommel-ask if you can bring light artillery on warships.

Gen. Cavallero-is not possible because the deck would be tossed into the sea,

MEETING SUMMARY AT ROMMEL COMMAND HEADQUARTERS AT BERTA
FROM 23:00 TO 24:00 of 17 DECEMBER 1941

PRESENT

Mar. Kesselring
Ecc. Cavallero
Ecc. Bastico
Ecc. Rommel
Ecc. Gambara
Ecc. Manca
Ecc. Calvi di Bergolo
and others

Leut. Col. of German G.S. - read various wiretaps of «I» German Office:

From an interview between 23rd C. A. and the 8th Army an enemy is: "we must attack the enemy that has weak parts". It seems that the enemy wants to do long range, because the communication still says: "should not be engaged at Dornis that must have the other direction with larger importance".

In a second interview at 17:22 between them: «The 8th army insists on the responsibility of the 13th C.A., clinging to the enemy. If you will have some damage turns slightly southward. "

These are confirmed by the news «I» Italian service, adding: "infantry units must precede those armor, all employed by the 8th army to a task of great importance." Probably this is a maneuver of encirclement.

The Navy announced that the bulk of the fleet, leaving the port of Alexandria, is at sea: 3 battleships, 6 cruisers, 11 destroyers. Also 1 battleship, 8 destroyers, plus 30 steamers between 1000-2000 tons. and 1 tanker, are on the move for landing on the coast.

Kesselring-believes that the battle ships are less. Eight ships are in Tobruk. It seems that the British fleet might take action against the Italian fleet and convoys. According to information the two fleets would be at 70 km. He also says that he started the torpedo planes, of which still has no news.

Marchesi-at 16:00, three torpedo planes started from Benghazi, met at 130 miles north of Benghazi: 1 battleship, 1 Cr., 10 DD.

Our aircraft attacked a warship. The other two have released two torpedoes at less than 500 m, hitting a cruiser.

Our aircraft has been downed.

16:30 p.m. left other torpedo planes that have crossed the British fleet ballistic contact with the Italian. Our two torpedo struck two cruisers, one of which is seen in flames.

Kesselring-very well. Reconnaissance confirmed interceptions, overall: a division towards Mechili and anything off.

Cavallero - also said that the number of ships seems exaggerated.

Read then Italian wiretaps.

Gambara-Reports on some communications without Major Revetria (Italian Information Bureau Chief).

Rommel-Says that the Italian information consistent with the Germanic, in part.

Kesselring-Supposed to conclude enemy Division.

Gambara-Marchesi-Pahwa of the column from Acroma points South towards Segnali, with 18 tanks.

Kesselring-tomorrow wants to help Gen. Rommel with all his air forces. The difficulty lies in the fact that, after the night, you can not determine where they both moved the enemy mass. Tomorrow wants to fight even with heavy aircraft on the high seas, including Derna and Maraua. He said Gen. Rommel to withdraw the armored forces in Benghazi. Only in this way can act to mass with his aviation, protecting our flank. Considers leaving at Mechili a small rearguard which must then retire. You must assume that a column goes toward Mechili, a further South. So do backward movement but do not forget the flank.

Cavallero-thinks the movement predicted by Rommel is too quick. There is a need for the armored units go by, hand in hand with the infantry. For the first two days, the infantry must go on foot because there is, for now, trucks. Then we'll have a little bit of vehicles and movement can be carried out more quickly.

Kesselring-if there is a movement toward Ajdabiya, you must prevent it at all costs. Therefore it is essential to strengthen Ajdabiya. The final purpose is to sit tight in Ajdabiya.

It also asks if you have provided the necessary time to move to our infantry.

Navarini - I will tell you shortly.

Gambara-asked whether the divisions « Ariete » and «Trieste» must follow the C.T.A.

Kesselring - (having conversed in German with Gen. Gause) Yes. The task is to go to Ajdabiya.

Adds that if you go to Ajdabiya, sees no criticism for the situation at Mechili.

Cavallero-, and at Mechili what remains?

Rommel-Could remain three motorized patrols.

Bastico-and hold up what? It is not an obstacle.

Rommel-precise: the Italian battalion (garrison) would be strengthened by three armored patrols.

Bastico-in my opinion, do not constitute a serious obstacle.

Gambara-He is in agreement with the Ecc. Bastico. Offers to remain at Mechili divisions « Ariete » and «Trieste» to protect 4 infantry divisions, already much sacrificed in earlier fighting.

Cavallero-You get an idea of the movement.

Bastico-still puts out his opinion, first expressed.

Cavallero-on behalf of Ecc. Bastico proposes to leave the Division «Trieste» at Mechili, to withdraw then slowly to protect the flank of the infantry troops. Moreover about the time needed for the withdraw says: «we calculate the movement in eight days»

Bastico-Gambara-we need a week to be in the right,
Rommel - (speaking in German) late
Kesselring-Rommel-Discuss the above issue speaking in German.
Cavallero-Gause-Discuss the issue speaking in German, secluded.
Cavallero-summarizes the partial discussions, saying that to XXI e X C.A. a week will go to Benghazi-Ajdabiya.
Rommel-prompts Ecc. Navarini if can carry all troops. Navarini-says it can carry the bulk of the troops, but not services.
Cavallero-adds that at Barce and Baracca are all that you think of the cost,
Kesselring-Says that according to his opinion and knowledge that has the Gen. Rommel, a few desert dirt tracks alleged to Gebel. Therefore considers that in 5-6 days you can withdraw, check the outlets with fewer forces.
Adds that the Navarini C.A. is so good moral conditions that may, in motion, protect the flanks.
Gambara-is the artillery?
Navanni-States that can make the movement of a large number of troops, but the services and heavy artillery from 149/12 and 149/35 will be left if you cannot have trucks with trailer.
Gambara-reveals his thoughts: the «Trieste»-cannot remain alone.
Cavallero-is for those who go to Ajdabiya who thinks?
And, after conferring in German with Kesselring and Rommel, adds: "tomorrow there is no danger, therefore tomorrow we see how things go".
Gambara-Agrees on the need to clarify the situation as soon as possible before deciding.
Communicate the directives of the Duce: «cover Tripolitania with Ajdabiya».
And says again: "a column that goes up to Ajdabiya-to prevent it. His way is less than ours, then it is necessary to soon".
Rommel-believes that aviation, tomorrow, will delay the movement of the enemy,
Kesselring-postpones a meeting placed for tomorrow, Benghazi: not before 12 o'clock.
Cavallero-okay.
Kesselring-expresses a desire to remain in place and wait for news of reconnaissance and also because there is so much to do. Therefore proposes to interview Berta or Cyrene.
Rommel-Says that needs to see the land and should move on the battlefield, to Ajdabiya. So it is better that the meeting take place in Benghazi.
Kesselring-requires the link tomorrow between Berka, Cyrene and Berta. *Cavallero*-Agrees.
Bastico-it is necessary Cyrene to act as intermediary.

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Operations in North Africa Vol. 2
Pictures



Il Gen. Ugo Cavallero

General Ugo Cavallero



Il Gen. Ettore Bastico, comandante sup. F.A. Africa Settentrionale

General Ettore Bastica, Supreme Commander Armed Forces North Africa



Il Gen. Vittorio Marchesi, comandante della 5ª squadra aerea

General Vittorio Marchesi, Commander 5th Air Fleet



Il Gen. Erwin Rommel, primo comandante del Deutches Afrikakosps

General Erwin Rommel, First Commander of the Deuthes Afrikakorps



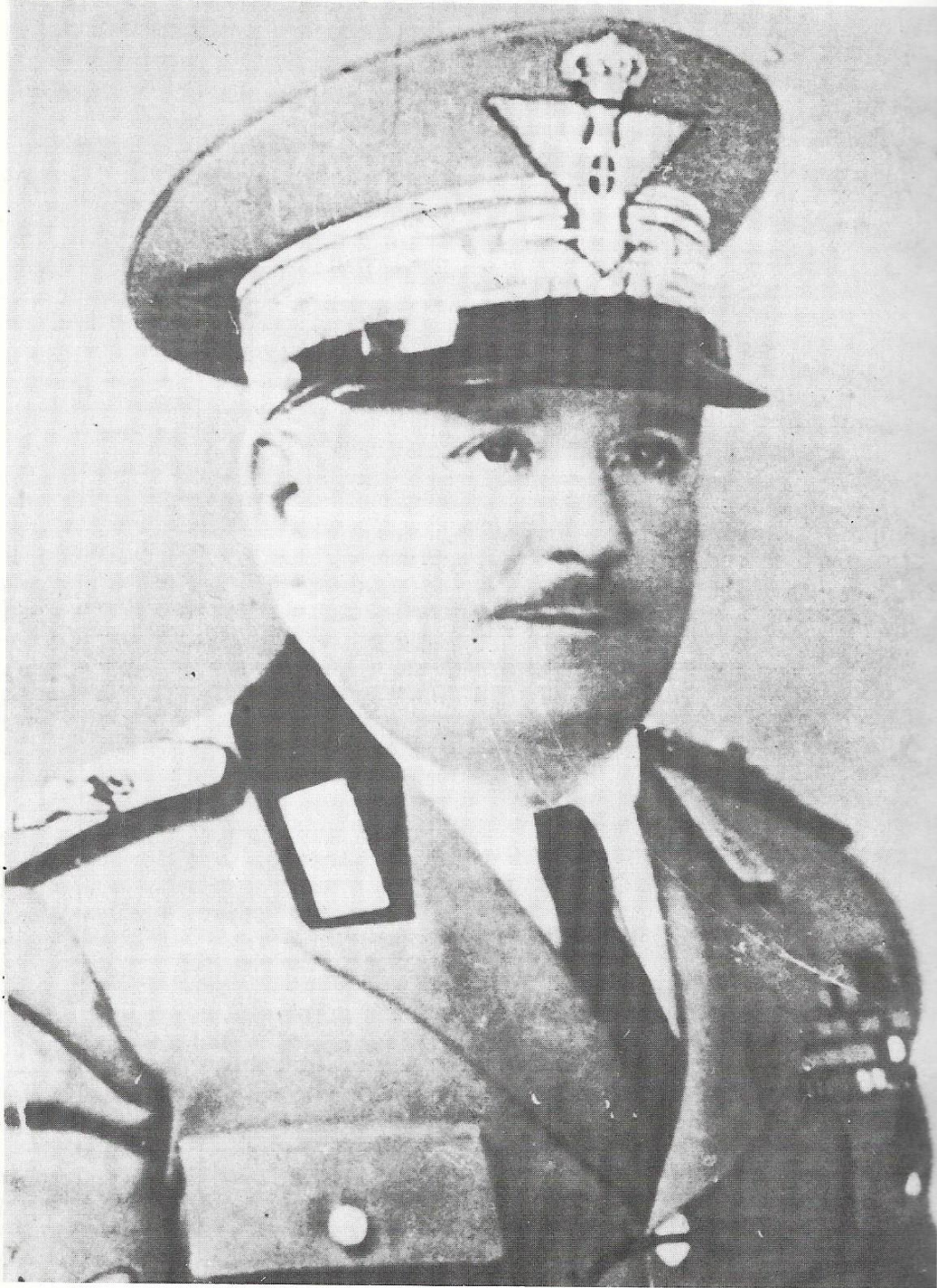
Il Gen. Gastone Gambara, comandante del Corpo d'Armata di manovra

Gen. Castone Gambara, Commander of the Corp of Maneuver



Il Gen. Benvenuto Gioda, comandante del X corpo d'Armata

Gen. Benvenuto Gioda, Commander of X Corps



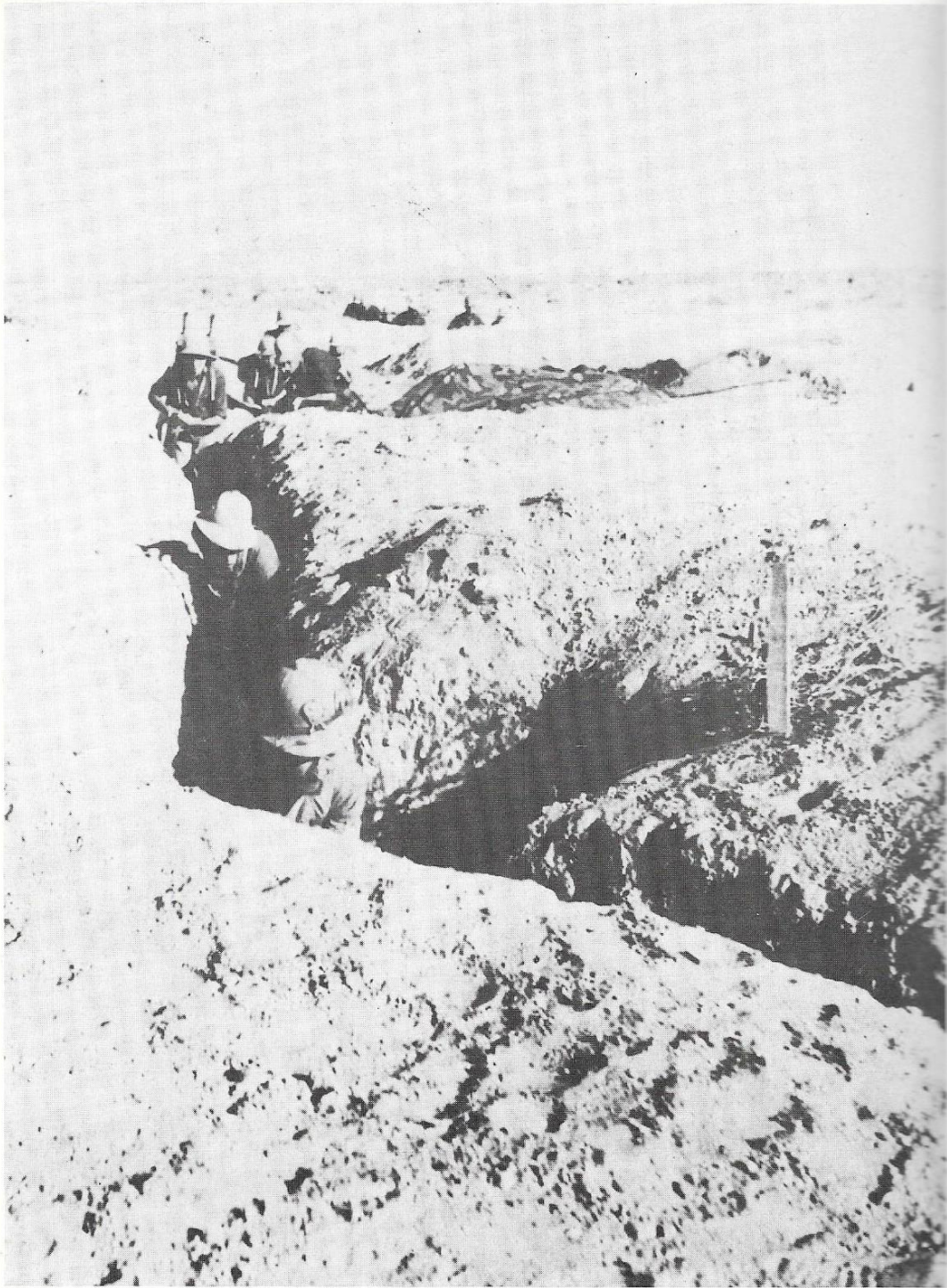
Il Gen. Enea Navarini, comandante del XXI corpo d'Armata

Gen. Enea Navarini, Commander of XXI Corp



L'Arco dei Fileni

The Arch of Fileni



Trincee davanti a Tobruk

Trench in front of Tobruk

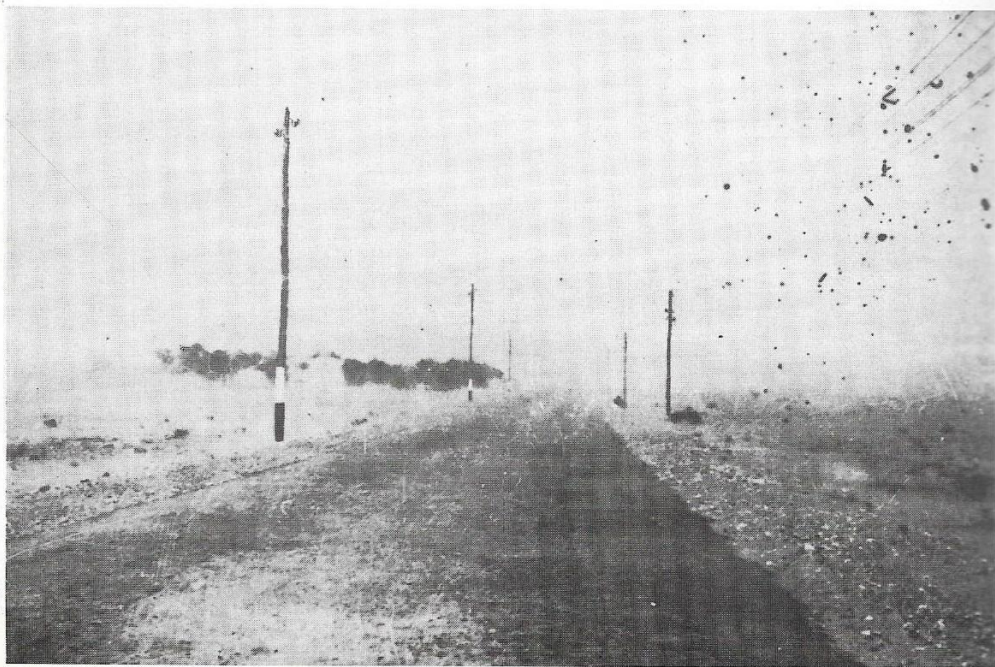


Inizio dei lavori di costruzione della «Strada dell'Asse» attorno a Tobruk

Beginning of the work of construction of the "Axis Road"



Il ghibli nelle oasi



La via Balbia spazzata dal ghibli

Top: The ghibli in an Oasis
Bottom: The Via Balbia during a ghibli



Il Gen. Gambara ad un osservatorio del DAK



Colloquio fra i Generali Cavallero e Bastico. In secondo piano il Gen. von Rintelen

Top: Gen. Gambara at a DAK observation post
Bottom: Gens Cavallero & Bastico. In second place Gen. von Rictelen

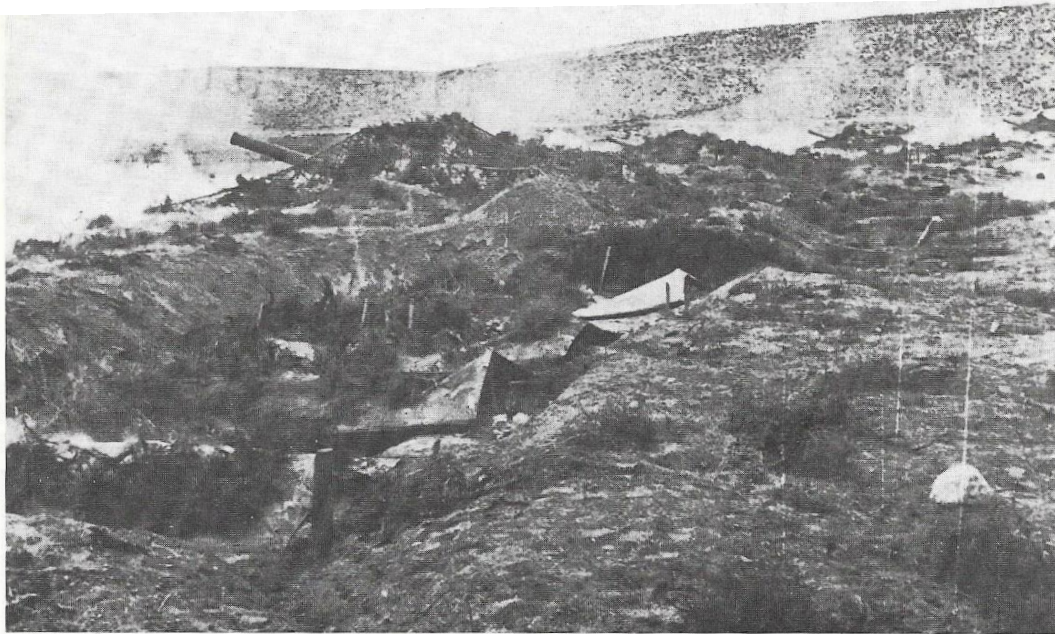


Da sinistra, i Gen. Marchesi, Gambara, Bastico, Calvi di Bergolo e Zingales



Prigionieri britannici catturati durante la 1ª controffensiva italo-tedesca

Top: From the left Gens. Marchesi, Gambara, Bastico, Calvi di Bergolo & Zingales
Bottom: British prisoners captured in the 1st Italian - German counter offensive

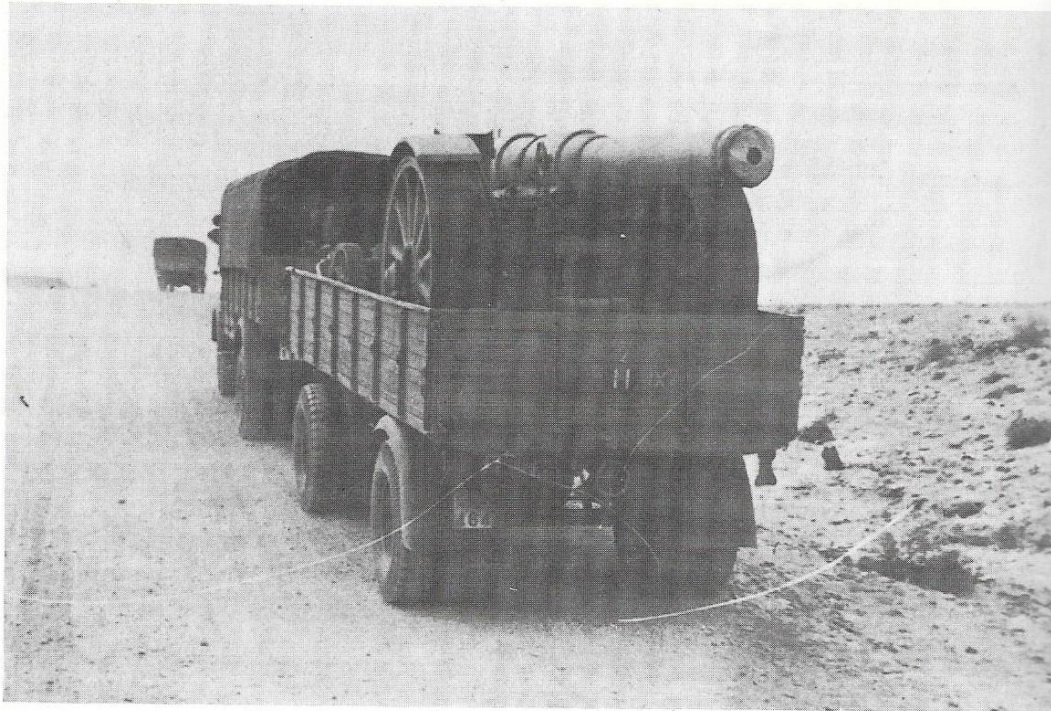


Batterie da 149/35 in azione sul fronte di Tobruk



Una batteria da 105/28 in azione sul fronte di Tobruk

Top: Battery of 149/35 in action in front of Tobruk
Bottom: A Battery of 105/28 in action in front of Tobruk



Pezzi da 152/37, di preda bellica, autotrasportati



Un piccolo cimitero di guerra nei pressi di Tobruk

Top: 152/37 Gun war prize on a truck
Bottom: A war cemetery near Tobruk